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THE VENGEANCE OF THE BRANDED BROWS

PROLOGUE

A DASTARDLY DEED

THE time was in the spring of the year—an eventful one, too, for all winter long the mountains and prairies had been wrapped in deep, silent sheets of pure white snow, now to be melted by an incessant three days' rain, until the dun of the prairies and the grey of the mountains were exposed to the sight.

The result of the precipitate rain and thaw had been to fill the streams to overflowing, and strike terror to the hearts of the squatters along their courses, for many a cabin or shanty was swept away by the stubborn and resistless element. For miles and miles the Missouri of the North, the Yellowstone, and both branches of the Platte, were more than bank full, and raging and rampaging as only a thoroughbred freshet can, while the lesser streams were proportionately high and dangerous.

'Way up along the Yellowstone stood a little squatters' town upon the immediate banks of the river, where dwelt trappers, hunters and settlers to the number of some two-score.

One day during the height of the flood, a "prairie schooner" came across the northern plains and entered the settlement, and the occupants, a couple of ruffianly-looking fellows, engaged accommodations at the little tavern.

They claimed to be trappers going south of the Yellowstone, and would have to wait until the flood abated ere they could ford that now turbulent stream. But little attention was paid to them, and they wandered about the settlement during the day.

About midnight, following the day, they had stealthily left the settlement behind, and in their "schooner," drawn by a spanking pair of horses, were making rapid time in a southerly direction, following the course of the noisy and turbulent Yellowstone.

The sky was clear, and the moon looked down upon the prairie with spectral effect.

At last, when several miles from the settlement, the wagon came to a halt upon the bank of the river.

A raft lay partly launched, near by—being several logs fastened together with lariats, and also secured to a stake upon the shore. This raft had been some distance from the water, originally, but the flood had gradually crept up until the rude craft was nearly afloat.

The two men disembarked from the vehicle, and going to the rear end, opened a gap in the canvas, and hauled forth, first a woman, young and pretty, and then two children, a boy and girl, in the neighbourhood of six years of age, and apparently twins.

Both the woman and the children had their arms secured behind their backs, and terrified expressions upon their faces told but too plainly that they feared the ruffianly pair, in whose power they were.

"In the name of Heaven, sir, I pray you to tell me what you intend to do with me and my children?" the mother cried, as the larger and fiercer of the two ruffians placed her upon her feet. "What evil motive prompted you to snatch me from my home at the settlement, and bring me hither?"

"Waal, mum, we had orders ter do it, ye see, an' we allus obey orders," the giant replied.

"Orders!" the young mother cried, in consternation—"orders? By whom did you receive *orders* to bring me here, pray?"

The two men exchanged glances, after which the larger one replied.

"I dunno's thar's enny harm in tellin' ye, mum, sence ye ain't got long to live. We aire respectively Black Eph and Boston Bill, practical cut-throats, an' sech like, an' we war hired ter do ther job by your own affectionate husband, whom we met up in the mines. Et appears that he left ye ter seek his fortune, an' hevin' struck it rich, an' found another damsel he likes better'n you, he has a desire ter git rid of you. So he hires me an' Boston Bill ter put ye aboard a ragin' raft on ther ragin'

Yellowstone, an' let ye go, trustin' ter luck that ye never turn up ag'in, ter bother him!"

Evident it was that the revelation of the ruffian came to her with stunning effect.

"My God! this cannot be true," she gasped, trembling from head to foot. "You are lying to me—Guy Hathaway would never be guilty of such an infamous scheme!"

"Thet's jest where ye make a mistake, mum," Black Eph replied confidently. "Ye tho't ye know'd yer man, but got fooled. We war hired ter set ye adrift, by Guy Hathaway, and no one else."

The little boy and girl, both pretty children, were bound to the mother with lariats in such a way that they could not be washed overboard unless she was, too. Both were speechless with fright, but pluckily kept from crying.

The trio were now placed upon the raft, and Boston Bill undid the fastenings which held it to the shore.

The moment it was freed from the land, the heavy float swept out into the roaring, moonlit stream, with Mrs. Hathaway crouching upon it, and her two children lashed to her sides; and away they were borne by the rushing waters, at a frightful velocity, soon passing from view of the two buffians upon the shore.

For hours the raft rushed on, threatening every minute to go to pieces, in the surface of crushing ice, water and floodwood, while the roar of the turbulent river was deafening.

The river seemed now to run faster and faster, and the raft kept pace. The velocity at which it was borne on was truly alarming. This fact was intensified when Mrs. Hathaway made the discovery that they were approaching a rapids.

Ahead loomed up a rocky point, against and partially over which the waters tumbled with a sullen roar.

Down upon this bar the raft was dashed, and the occupants hurled high and dry upon the sandy shore, while with a groaning sound the clumsy craft went to pieces, and its timbers were washed away with the flood.

On the following forenoon the flood had abated considerably, and the river had shrunk to its usual proportions, when a horseman came from the eastern plain and halted upon the shore of the Yellowstone, just opposite the bar that stretched its peninsular neck out into the stream, and against which the raft had been wrecked the night before.

A dashing young fellow of eighteen years, handsome of face and form, was the horseman, and his garb of buckskin and well-selected weapons betokened him a hunter.

"Ugh! Prince, the river is rather a cool bath, isn't it?" he murmured, as he patted his horse upon the neck; "nevertheless, we shall have to cross it in order to reach our destination."

The current was still swift, but seeming to understand the words of the young hunter, the horse plunged into the stream and swam it resolutely, until he finally emerged upon the bar.

Scarcely had the young horseman gained the bar ere he discovered the bodies of the previous night's wreck, lying where they had been cast, in an insensible condition. Hastily dismounting, he approached them, and made an examination.

"A mother and her children, evidently," he muttered, sadly. "But how came they bound in this shape? Some band of redskins must have left them here to be washed away. Ha! the little girl's heart still beats! The others are dead."

With his knife he severed the lariat that bound the trio together, and raised the little girl from the ground. There was no mistaking that her heart still beat, although she was yet insensible.

"Poor little waif," the young hunter murmured, tenderly laying her upon a blanket. "I have found her, and I would be a brute to leave her here to die. No; I will take her with me, and care for her. But first, I must be sure that the others are dead."

A closer examination failed to discover any sign of life in the mother or the boy, and having no implements the hunter was forced to leave them lying there unburied, while, with the little girl in his arms, he mounted his horse, and galloped away to the southwestward.

Not over two hours after the departure of the hunter, a second horseman forded the Yellowstone to the peninsula, and discovered the bodies, with considerable surprise.

He was a large-framed man, clad throughout in buffalo-skin, with the furry side out, and in face looked to be about fifty years of age. His hair, and huge beard of great length, however, were as white as snow, and there was a dull, sorrowful expression to his eyes, that told of some great sorrow which had wrecked his mind, and caused it at times to wander. He was well-armed with rifle, pistols and knife, and the horse he bestrode was no common brute.

Immediately upon discovering the bodies, he drew rein, dismounted and approached them.

A strange cry escaped him as he bent over the woman—a cry of anguish and remorse.

"Bethel! Bethel! Oh! my God have

mercy!" he moaned, bowing his head upon the cold inanimate form, and sobbing convulsively. "Dead—my child, dead, and here in this wild spot? Ah! by Heaven! she has been bound, but her bonds have been severed by a keen-edged blade."

The White Beard had now leaped to his feet with a terrible expression of rage in his eyes.

"I see! I see!" he hissed, his hands clinched, and muscles standing out in bold relief. "Foul work has been done here, and I know at whose door to lay the crime of murder. Bethel, my child, hear me swear in the presence of God, that your wrongs shall be avenged. Ah!"

The old man started, for he saw the limbs of the boy stir. A hasty examination revealed that he was alive, but insensible.

A gleam of joy flushed over the old man's face at this discovery, as if he had already planned some future course of action.

Carrying the body of poor Mrs. Hathaway into a natural niche in a huge mass of rocks near by, he left it there, and rolled a boulder before the entrance. Then returning to the boy, he raised him tenderly in his arms, and vaulted into the saddle as spryly as any younger person could have done.

The next instant he dashed away, in nearly the same course taken by the younger scout but a few hours ahead of him.

Just six years afterward.

The night again was moonlight, and a balmy one in early springtime, with an earthy smell that had only come since the snow had gone.

Down a sort of dug-way trail, or wagon road, that descended from a mountain of the southern Wind River Range, into a deep canyon below, rode, in double file, a body of horsemen, some sixty or more, in number, well mounted and armed, but roughly dressed and bewhiskered, to a man.

And the fact that they carried, attached to their saddles and horses, implements commonly used by miners and some of the paraphernalia of camping-life, indicated the fact that they were what is known in all the gold-mining districts as "stampeders."

Dissatisfied with the remuneration of one mining locality, this class of characters, invariably made up of adventurers, ruffians and hard citizens, make no bones, literally, of depopulating their former "city," and stampeding to some other and "fatter" streak they have heard of, and if they chance to be strongest in numbers, woe be to the citizens of the place invaded, as they have the choice of only two things, either to "bounce," or fight.

This party of horsemen was such a gang,

which had stampeded from the quartz mines of the Sweetwater Mountains—men who recked little the value of life, and feared neither man nor death.

Half an hour of descent by the tortuous dug-way brought them to the canyon bottom, which was several acres wide, and of a sandy and rocky nature, and also watered by a small creek, which, though narrow, was very deep. On reaching the bottom, the stampeders turned and rode in the same direction they had come, only along through the canyon, until they came to where there stood a large two-story log cabin, from one of the windows of which there streamed a light.

Up to the cabin door they rode, and then came to a halt, the leader rapping smartly upon the door with the butt of his rifle.

The door was opened after a few minutes by an old man with a sweeping white beard. He was dressed throughout in untanned buffalo-skin, and, as he made his appearance, clutched a heavy rifle in his grasp.

Following him to the open doorway, came an old wrinkled and toothless hag of the most hideous aspect, and a bright young lad of twelve years, whose features and form were markedly handsome, inasmuch as he bore no trace of resemblance to the strange pair with whom he kept company.

"Well! well!" the old man demanded, querulously, as he surveyed the line of horsemen with evident displeasure, "what brings you upon the land of White Beard?"

"Waal, old man, we've cum hyar ter take persession uv ther placer mines ye've bin workin' so long on ther sly!" one of the stampeders announced grimly. "You an' yer old woman have played yer witch game about as long as et'll work, an' now we're goin' ter see ef thar's any gold in Buckskin Canyon, or not. So pack up yer duds, an' prepare ter skin out ter onc't!"

"No! no! you shall not drive me from my possessions!" the White Beard cried, fiercely and resolutely.

"I came here first, ere other foot of mortal man had ever trodden here, and staked off this gulch, an' et's mine, as it is Government land, and I have tenanted it longer than the time exacted."

"Ken't help that, old hoss!" the spokesman of the stampeders exclaimed, roughly. "Ye've either got to vamoose, or we'll plant ye right heer in under ther shadder of your cabin, you bet!"

"Hurrah!" shouted the stampeders, to a man. "Bounce out, old White Whiskers, or we'll plant ye, immegetly."

"I will not leave my rightful possessions without a struggle!" the hermit cried, sternly, and raising his rifle with amazing quickness, he fired.

THE VENGEANCE OF THE BRANDED BROWS

There came a cry from the spokesman of the party, and he dropped from his saddle.

Then, before the White Beard could shut the door, there was a rifle report, and he clasped his hands to his heart, with a groan—staggered back, and fell into the arms of the youth!

With a scream of rage the old hag snatched a pair of revolvers from his belt, and turning, opened a deadly fire upon the stampeder, her example being followed by the boy, as soon as he found that White Beard was dead, and could lay him upon a rude couch in the room. But, in this case resistance was useless.

The stampeder leaped from their horses with hoarse cries of vengeance, and poured into the cabin by way of the door and the windows, in overwhelming numbers, and in short order the hag and the boy found themselves prisoners in the hands of the miners.

"Curse you! curse you!" the hag cried, with fierce efforts to free herself. "You have killed my husband, and usurped the rights of our home, but I will have revenge! Hear me swear it, that, though people may invade Buckskin Canyon in thousands, and houses and spires may be erected here, the place shall never prosper. Devastation and ruin shall attack it—road-agents shall plunder it—death shall reach every man that attempts to carry an ounce of gold out of this canyon! I swear it! I curse you, all!"

Some of the men looked a little startled.

Throughout all the Wind River region of Wyoming was Wild Meg known and feared as a strange, mysterious creature, whom many believed to be a veritable witch or leagued with the devil. For years she and White Beard had been known to live in Buckskin Canyon, but the superstitious dread of them had heretofore caused the miners and prospectors to steer wide of the place. Therefore, her curse was not a thing particularly desirable, and most of the miners looked disturbed and afraid.

One, however, appeared reckless of fear, and he was Black Eph, a notorious ruffian, who had visited nearly every mining strike in the West.

"We don't keer a durned fer yer curses, old woman!" he declared, rudely. "We ain't afeard uv ye, ef ye be a witch, an' all we want o' ye is ter clear out an' leave us in persession. Boys, tie her an' ther b'yee onter two hosses, an' put a thorn or sage stalk under ther tails ter wake 'em up. Bet a cooky we won't see no more o' ther Witch fer a dog's age!"

The old hag began to shriek and curse so terribly now, that she was gagged.

Horses were then produced, and both she

and the boy were tied into the saddles; after which thornapple brush was fastened in under the tail of each horse, and they were turned loose.

With almost human shrieks, they dashed off down the canyon at breakneck speed, wild with pain, and bearing the woman and the youth into unseen perils, and leaving the stampeder masters of the situation.

CHAPTER I

THE SUNSET CHASE OF THE BRANDED BROWS

ANOTHER lapse of six years, and we once more take up the thread of our romance.

The sun was going down the horizon, and bathing the mountains in a farewell glory of golden light one balmy June day; the perfumed western breeze was lulling nature into a sweet repose; even the dark recesses of Buckskin Canyon seemed pregnant with the balmy peace of the approaching night, until the drowsy echoes were startled by the rapidly approaching clatter of hoofs.

Nearer and nearer they came, accompanied alternately by yells of triumph, and yells of defiance.

Finally, from around a bend in the canyon, swept a band of horsemen at full tilt—a wild-looking set of fellows, attired in tanned buckskin, and armed to the teeth.

One startling peculiarity about their appearance was a *branded mask* upon their faces—a black, scar-like belt that ran across each man's countenance, beginning just below the bridge of the nose, and ending half-way in the middle of the forehead, just above the brows. It was no mask, but a brand of black, upon the skin itself, and gave the party a most strange appearance.

Most of the men wore beards, but the single horseman who led the advance was yet a mere youth, evidently, for he wore no beard of any kind, and was smaller in frame than the others.

There were some eight or ten in the party, and they were urging their animals to their greatest speed, which fact was accounted for when shortly after the appearance of the Branded Brows, another body of horsemen swept into view, around the bend, in hot pursuit. Four times as many were there in the numerical count of the pursuers as in the pursued, and their attire proclaimed them to be miners.

The Branded Brows, however, were in no immediate danger, unless their horses gave out, for they were out of easy rifle range, and gaining ground, if anything.

"Halt, there! 'tis useless for you to seek to escape," shouted the leader of the miners, a large, broad-shouldered man, with silvered

beard and hair. "We will pursue you to the end of the earth, but what we'll have you."

"But you won't get me, nor my men!" the young captain of the Branded Brows retorted, coolly. "You had better take your miner dogs back to Placer City, General Hathaway, and by so doing save their lives!"

"Ha! ha! I'll risk their lives. When you and your black-browed devils surrender, we will go back. On! boys—on! Five hundred dollars to the man who captures Solid Sam, alive!"

"Ha! ha!" the young outlaw laughed back. "I'll give five hundred additional, myself, to the lucky man! On, pards, on!"

Fiercely then did the pursuers and the pursued urge on their already foaming horses, through the long, level canyon, which stretched for miles away into the heart of the Wind River Mountains, the clatter of the iron-shod hoofs arousing echoes that mayhap had never been aroused before.

On—on—on they dashed, silence reigning in the stead of the previous cries—the miners who had taken upon themselves to do Vigilante service, resolutely determined not to let the notorious gang of road-agents escape.

For six months this unknown band of branded browed men had played the road-agent in Buckskin Canyon, in the most bold and daring manner, and with a success that no amount of vigilance or precaution appeared to baffle.

Not a stage or a miner left the canyon in any direction, without being halted, summarily.

Hordes of these same Branded Brows were scattered through the mountains and canyons, and the leading spirit of them all was a bold, reckless person of youthful years, whom nobody knew except by his reputed "handle" of Solid Sam.

On—on—on sped the chase, the speed gradually lessening instead of increasing, for the horses of either party were hard blown by the long race, and were flagging out.

Solid Sam noticed this with a fierce glitter in his eagle eye, and also noted the fact that the pursuers were slowly gaining on them.

"On, boys—urge on your horses, or they will get into short rifle-range yet!" he cried. "If they do, our jig is up, fer they're four to our one."

The Branded Brows seemed fully aware of this, but there was no help for it, for, urge their jaded steeds though they did, they could not close their eyes to the fact that the enemy was slowly but surely gaining on them. Solid Sam saw this too, and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like a curse.

"It's no use o' torturing the horses, boys," he said, finally. "We're losin', and the first we know we'll get a dose of round lead in our backs. We may as well make a stand and fight it out!"

"You go on, captain, and we'll stay and fight it out!" one of the men suggested—a young man, nearer the chief's age.

Solid Sam flushed indignantly.

"Lieutenant Breeze, you do me a great injustice!" he replied, chidingly. "While I have led the Branded Brows have you ever known me to desert my men, no matter what scrape we've got into? No, sir! I'll stick to the gang till the last. Ha! what did I tell you?"

Even as he spoke the towering canyon walls echoed the report of a score of rifles, and a yell of victory came from the pursuers.

Four of the Branded Brows threw up their arms and dropped forward upon their horses' necks, and even with the shadow of death creeping over them, they had the presence of mind to lock their arms about the necks of the animals, and were accordingly not dismounted.

Instantly Solid Sam and the other remaining outlaws wheeled their horses toward the Vigilantes, and opened fire with their deadly Winchester rifles.

Six of the miners were hit, more or less seriously, and dropped behind, while the remainder came on, firing and yelling like a pack of bloodthirsty Comanches.

Bravely the Branded Brows stood their ground, and returned the fire with telling effect, for the number of the Vigilante band diminished rapidly.

But not without company, for one by one the road-agents dropped off, until only Solid Sam and Lieutenant Breeze alone faced the enemy, wounded but still able to attend to business.

"It's no use of standing longer!" the young captain said. "Make another spurt, and see if we can't get away!"

Accordingly they once more wheeled their horses, and applied the spurs vigorously, and the noble animals responded with a brave effort.

Fortunately for the two fugitives, the Vigilantes were not supplied with breech-loading or magazine rifles, and, after each shot was fired, it was several moments ere they could reload.

Having discharged their weapons, to a man, upon the instant before Sam and Breeze resumed their flight, the interval required for reloading gave the fugitives a chance to get once more out of range.

"Ha! ha! ha!" Solid Sam yelled, shaking his fist back at the pursuing Vigilantes, triumphantly. "We're ahead again, my noble General Hathaway, and once more we

defy you, as we've got it all our own way now."

"How do you mean?" Breeze demanded, anxiously.

"I'll soon show you. Below here is the deer trail that leads up through the Hedge Pine slope onto the hog-back. It's a road I was over once, and is our nearest route to the peak."

The lieutenant nodded, and they dashed on. Soon they rounded another bend in the canyon, and here the walls retreated into gradually steep slopes, which were covered with pines, grown close together.

Wheeling his horse from the canyon, Solid Sam led the way over a path that penetrated the pine jungle; Lieutenant Breeze followed.

The path was a deer trail, and was narrow and tortuous, but the animal of Solid Sam followed it with as much ease as would an old trailer.

The route now lay up-hill, and it was impossible for horses to go faster than a walk; accordingly the two fugitives allowed their fagged-out steeds to take it leisurely, for the young chief well understood that the pursuers would not be apt to indulge in any random racing through the thick forest.

"Maybe they'll conclude it ain't healthiest for them to follow us now," Breeze remarked.

"Don't fear that. They'll follow us until we get to the Devil's Abyss, at least," Solid Sam replied. "Then, I reckon, some of 'em will halt."

"You're right; they will," the lieutenant agreed, with a nod. "I don't believe they've got a horse that can leap across."

"If they had, there's not a man among them with pluck enough to attempt it."

Loud yells in the rear now announced that the Vigilantes had discovered the fugitives' escape, if not the direction in which they had gone.

But the fact did not materially alarm Solid Sam, for he kept on, steadily, a quiet smile lingering about his handsome mouth.

For an hour or more, both he and Breeze followed the tortuous ascending trail through the pine wood, and like vengeful sleuths, the Vigilantes were heard dogging behind.

Night closed in, but an early moon, nearly at its full, soon arose, and shot strangely grotesque bars of light down through the pine branches.

Finally, the fugitives emerged from the forest upon a stretch of mountainous table-land, hundreds of feet above the canyon bottom.

Once out of the gloomy woodland, the night assumed a more brilliant aspect, with a horizon of ethereal haziness, a soft blue sky, and a soaring moon which diffused a

flood of mellow light upon the wild but picturesque landscape.

Before the fugitives stretched a line or chain of mountains, on the right and left of which yawned frightful abysses. This natural hog-back was smooth and level, and of considerable length, stretching away toward the north-west.

"Ah! I see where we are now," Breeze ejaculated, as they emerged from the pines. "We can indeed laugh at the Vigilantes."

"I should feel somewhat like laughing myself, were it not that we've lost so many of the band," Solid Sam replied, sadly. "But the poor fellows shall not go unavenged. I am just beginning to wake up to the fact that I have not given the miners of Buckskin Gulch a strong enough deal. They shall have cause to fear me and my vengeance even more in the future than they have in the past!"

"Bravo, Captain Sam! As usurpers of your rights, they have no right to expect that you will submit to their invasion. By right of the testament of old White Beard, the canyon is yours."

"Ay! mine and Wild Meg's—the whole tract covered by Placer City, and the mines. Curse them! They drove us from the claim six years ago, but it has not been a very profitable job. Ten of those who drove us off have gone up Salt River by the usual boat—five more have died with their boots on, and seven have got their pass through the kindness of the Black Brows. A large number yet remain, but Placer City will be an unlucky town fer 'em."

"Why is it that General Hathaway bears you so great an enmity, captain?" Breeze demanded, as they spurred along side by side.

"Perhaps because I bear his name. I know of no other reason," the young outlaw replied. "Then, too, as you know, I've made it a practice of late to toll his interests, he being one of the wealthiest of the Placer Cityites. Six years ago, when Wild Meg and I were driven from the placer mines, that we had worked for a number of years, we jointly took an oath, that we should have a portion of what was rightfully our own, by tolling every miner or grist of gold, at each and every opportunity. That's how I became a road-agent."

Further conversation was now cut short, for the Vigilantes at this juncture emerged from the forest in their rear, and with fierce yells struck spurs to their animals, in hot pursuit.

Solid Sam and the lieutenant also increased the speed of their animals, and the pursuers and pursued again dashed rapidly through the moonlight.

Half an hour went by; then the Branded

Brows suddenly lashed their animals forward and were seen to leap forward seemingly through mid-air, but what was in reality a yawning gulf—a mighty seam that split the hog-back in twain!

A good fifteen feet did the trained steeds of the road-agents leap, to a safe footing upon the farther side, and then dashed on, while Solid Sam and Bill Breeze gave vent to a triumphant yell of victory.

When safely out of rifle range upon the farther side, Solid Sam drew rein, and waited for the Vigilantes to arrive at the opposite edge of the abyss, which they did, with cries and curses of rage.

"Ha! ha! gents! I thought you were going to carry Solid Sam back with you to Placer City, to-night, as a special guest of a little necktie party!" the young chief of the Branded Brows cried, mockingly. "Rather made a miscalculation, didn't ye?—or are you going to follow me still?"

"Curses on you, boy!" General Hathaway cried fiercely. "I order you to surrender at once!"

"Oh, ye do, eh? Well, I can't see the point of that little joke. If you're going to order 'em, I'll pass and you can take the trick. Ha! ha! see the point of that, don't ye? I'm going to pass out of your reach jest as nice as a slippery eel. Hate to tear myself away from such eligible company, but I must bid you good evening—that is, *au revoir*. Tra! la! la! till I come down to Placer City the next time after my customary toll."

And with a laugh, he wheeled his horse and rode leisurely away, accompanied by Breeze, leaving the miner Vigilantes in a state of rage bordering on frenzy.

CHAPTER II

THE CAVE RETREAT

SOLID SAM and Lieutenant Breeze, after leaving the baffled Vigilantes, rode on along the hog-back for perhaps half an hour, when they came to its termination in the form of a round mountain, three sides of which sloped nearly perpendicularly downward into a frightful yawning gulch, while the fourth side connected with the mountain table-land, or hog-back.

At the point of connection there was a large black hole in the face of the mountain, from which gleamed a cheery light, and into which Solid Sam and the lieutenant rode.

The interior proved to be a high cavern of considerable size, and was the retreat of the Branded Brows.

One portion was used as stabling for the horses of the band, while the other part was

occupied by the outlaws themselves. A fire burned in the centre of this section, to keep off the chill and damp of the cold rocks, and around this a half-dozen fellows and an old, repulsive hag of a woman, were sitting upon camp-stools, engaged in smoking pipes, as Solid Sam and the lieutenant entered.

They arose with grunts of surprise when they noted that the two returned alone.

"How is this?" the hag demanded—who, by the way, was Wild Meg, the Witch. "Why is it you come back *alone*, Sam? Why is it, I say?"

Solid Sam slipped from the saddle and gave his horse over into the charge of one of the outlaws, ere he vouchsafed a reply.

"Because we got chased by a gang of the Placer City miners, and lost every man but Breeze and I," he said, finally.

"It's partly your fault, too, for I shouldn't have gone yet for a week, if it hadn't been for you."

"Pooh! the loss of the men is trifling, when we can easily get more. Did you make a raise from the outward bound stage this morning?" the Witch asked, eagerly.

"No; the usual stage did not leave the town."

"Why did it not?"

"I don't know, exactly. There's a pile of gold scattered about the camp among the mine-owners, and they're trying for a chance to work its passage out of the place without my knowing it."

"Ha! curse them!" the Witch exclaimed, darkening with rage. "They have usurped our claim and driven us from it, and now they would beat us out of the revenue we have exacted. Curse them, I say!"

"Curses won't hurt them no more than the bite of a mosquito," Solid Sam replied, with a smile. "They think that the mines of Buckskin Canyon are rightfully theirs, and that we are committing a gross sin by 'robbing the stage,' as they call it, and tolling the bank of such pilgrims as have made their pile and started for other parts. So they've organized a Vigilance gang, and as a result, I got started out of town to-day, and the whole of us got chased up the canyon. All the band went down with their boots on, facing the music, except me an' Breeze, an' we escaped."

Wild Meg paced about the cavern for several moments in silence, but the picture of consuming fury.

She was an uncanny looking creature at the best, with her wrinkled, ugly countenance, and thin, angular form, and her manner of dress in no way enhanced her beauty, for she wore a flaring red skirt, tattered and ragged, and a dirty green waist, belted, and the belt containing a half-

dozen heavy cavalry pistols. No covering she wore upon her wild, dishevelled hair, that the frosts of many years had streaked with silver, and her feet were also bare.

For some time she continued to pace to and fro, as if to work off her passion, the eyes of Solid Sam and the Branded Brows following her with doubting glances.

"General Hathaway is at the bottom of this movement?" she finally demanded, stopping short, and gazing at Solid Sam, inquiringly.

"Yes," he replied, "or rather at the head of it, for he led the chase to-day."

"Humph! did you hear anything more concerning him?"

"Yes. He's going to be married, as you have expected. The woman he is to marry came on in the morning stage, accompanied by a young lady she calls her daughter, and a man reported to be General Hathaway's brother."

The Witch started with surprise at this.

"Ha! what is this brother's first name, did you hear?"

"Yes. The general met them at the stage, and welcomed them—the man, as Colonel Carrol Hathaway—the others, the ladies, as Mrs. and Miss Miner."

"Yes, yes, I believe he did have a brother, Wild Meg muttered thoughtfully, as if unmindful that she had auditors.

"I heard tell of the fellow, Carrol, as a wild, reckless devil, such as the army produces. But, you have not told me, boy, when this proposed marriage of the general takes place? Be spry, now, for I am much concerned. Ha! ha! yes, very much concerned!"

"The wedding comes off to-morrow in mid-forenoon, I believe, at the general's shanty."

"Good! I will be on hand! ha! ha! yes—on hand!" the Witch hissed, glaring at the ruddy fire, which burned in the centre of the cavern.

Then she turned and opened a large wooden chest near by, and proceeded to haul out dresses of the costliest materials; jewellery, and numerous articles of a lady's toilet, laughing strangely, the meanwhile.

"I'll go down to the weddin' in style," she chuckled, glaring wildly around. "It's a long time since I dressed up gay, an' painted and puffed. But, I haven't yet forgot the art, an' I'll show 'em how to put on style! Ha! ha! I'll show 'em, and there'll be blood on the altar, too!"

Armed with a rich assortment of feminine paraphernalia, the old woman then retired into a sort of inner cavern, to make her preparations.

Where six years before had stood a rude

log cabin in Buckskin Canyon, now rose a miniature mining city—a collection of shanties, tenanted for a variety of purposes, as dwellings, stores, offices, saloons, gambling hells and dance-houses—quite a respectable sized young city, too, and called Placer, or Placer City.

Some two thousand souls claimed this city of the gulch as its regular and average floating population, and the fact of its constant growth and the addition to its people was mainly owing to the richness and seemingly inexhaustible supply of its mineral resources.

General Guy Hathaway was the big man of Placer City. Every place has to have a sort of leading citizen, and such a person the aged general was to the little mining strike in Buckskin Gulch. He owned five different mines in company with a man whose name was Sydney Atherton, or Santa Fe Syd, and a large interest in the shanties of the town belonged to him.

His income from the five placer claims was estimated at a thousand dollars a day, and beside this, he and Atherton had a drift drilled into the rocky wall of the canyon, with good prospects of another rich strike.

Being a man of commanding figure and dignity, and one of the original stampeders, he had been universally looked up to as a sort of leading citizen.

If a dispute occurred, or any advice was needed, the general was always looked to to decide the matter. His wealth he spread about with a liberal hand, and he grew to be the most popular man in the gulch.

On the day following the night that had witnessed the race between the Vigilantes and the Branded Brows, Placer City was alive with excitement, for in mid-forenoon, General Hathaway was to take to himself a wife in the person of a charming lady of Chicago, who had already arrived. This fact, together with another, which was that this was the first matrimonial event on the Placer City records, created an extraordinary sensation, and the miners to a man, laid aside the pan and shovel, to indulge in a holiday, in honour to the general.

And when the hour came for the consummation of the nuptials every man, woman and child that could, crowded into the cabin which served as a church.

The general and the bridal party had luckily taken refuge in the "church" ahead of the crowd, and consisted of the general in person, a portly man, well dressed, and somewhat dignified in his bearing, with silvered brown hair and beard, and eyes of the same hue. Next came the bride-to-be, a richly-attired lady of five-or-six-and-thirty years—comely in face and form, with

dark hair and eyes, the latter piercing in their glances.

The groomsman, Colonel Hathaway; a brother of the general, was a tall well-formed man, with immense fiery red side-whiskers, and a countenance inclined to be rather prepossessing, but for the sensual expression about his mouth. He was richly and flashily attired, and appeared rather disdainful in his bearing.

The bridesmaid, Miss May Miner, who was said to be the bride's daughter by a former marriage, was a very pretty and modest-looking maiden of seventeen or eighteen, richly attired, and looking very charming, with her fair countenance, soft golden hair, and eyes of sparkling blue.

CHAPTER III

THE WILL

AFTER the patience of the crowd had become nearly exhausted at the long wait before the "splicing" took place, the general led his lady forward to a space that had been reserved by the groomsman and bridesmaid. The minister, Jim Byles by name, then read the customary marriage service, in a loud voice, concluding with the following deviation:

"Do you, General Hathaway, take this hyar woman fer yer legally wedded wife, an' sw'ar by the pin't o' yer bowie knife, ter hang tew her, in ther journey thru this weary vale o' tears?"

"I do!" the general replied, with a faint smile.

"An' do you, marm, promise ter hang ter ther general, ditto, an' pervide his repasts, an' be a luvin' wife, wi'out lookin' bias at uther pilgrims!"

"I do," Mrs. Miner said, a trifle haughtily, for this uncouth fashion of marriage law of Placer City did not impress her very favourably, she being a city bred lady, and not a little proud and supercilious.

"Then in ther name o' ther great and only Jehova, I, Jim Byles, minister o' ther Gospel, do turn ther key in ther padlock, an' pronounce ye man and wife. Whom God hath joined tergether, let no man put asunder."

"Ha! ha! whom God hath joined together, I will put asunder!" shrieked a wild voice, and the next instant a pistol report rang loudly through the room.

With a groan General Hathaway clutched his garments in the neighbourhood of his heart, and staggered back into Colonel Carrol Hathaway's arms.

With a wild shout from the crowd, all eyes were turned toward one of the windows

of the cabin, where the repulsive face of Wild Meg, the Witch, was seen glaring into the church.

It was quickly withdrawn, however, and the next minute the swift clatter of horse's feet was heard.

While some of the spectators rushed out of the church to give chase, others crowded forward, to get a peep at the wounded man.

"My God, brother Guy, are you killed?" Colonel Carrol cried anxiously, as he supported the general to a seat, while the new Mrs. Hathaway drew near, with a whitening face. "Where did the bullet strike you?"

"In the region of my heart," was the faint reply. "I'm done for, so carry me home, for there is much I must attend to ere I die!"

"Will some one assist in carrying the general to the shanty he occupies?" the colonel demanded, glancing around.

A half-dozen of able-bodied men instantly volunteered their services, and the general was raised and borne from the church up the street to his rude but commodious shanty, where he was laid upon a bed, in a neatly-furnished bedchamber. He was pretty well exhausted by this time, but a doctor soon came, and administered remedies that revived him, in a measure. An examination of the wound proved that there was no help for the big citizen of Placer City, for, while it did not bleed outwardly, it did inwardly, and he was rapidly filling up.

When apprised of this fact by the surgeon, he smiled, faintly.

"Yes, I am going to die, and by the hand of a creature I don't know—a wild roving lunatic, who has often threatened me with her babble, but whom I have never paid the least attention to. Doctor, how long have I to live?"

"It is hard to determine," was the grave reply. "You may survive twenty-four hours, and, again, may not live over an hour. If you have anything to attend to, you had better do it at once."

The mine-owner was silent a few moments, as he lay back on his pillow, as if in meditation.

The colonel, the new bride, and her daughter, together with the parson, Jim Byles, and the surgeon "Doc" Lee, constituted the five who were gathered about the death-bed.

"I am very rich," General Hathaway finally said, as if talking aloud to himself. "I have a million dollars saved up, in pure gold coin and greenbacks, besides my mines, worth at least a million more. This wealth I cannot take with me, and shall have to leave it to some of you, I suppose."

There was rather a regretful expression to

his tone, as much as if he was loth to leave his riches behind, and his eyes wandered over the faces of those around him, critically.

Despite any efforts they may have made to conceal it, there was an eager, hopeful expression upon the faces of Colonel Carrol, and the new Mrs. Hathaway, which seemed to suggest plainly that they were ready and over-willing to step into the dead man's shoes.

The general seemed to notice this, and a gleam of cunning shot into his eyes.

"You two need not look so hopeful," he said, decidedly, "for I perceive the drift of your thoughts, and shall baffle you by cutting you off, short of your expectations. Wouldn't you be pleased to have me leave the whole of the property and cash to one or the other of you? Ha! ha! undoubtedly you would. Your feet are probably itching to pull on my shoes. Ha! ha! that would be nice, but I shall baffle you!"

"Guy, my dear brother, you do both your wife and me a great injustice!" the colonel said, evidently chagrined at the pointed accusation. "Neither of us have the least hope or desire of becoming your heirs. Indeed, we wish you to use your own judgment in making your devise, believing that we shall be perfectly satisfied with it."

"Of course, dear husband," Mrs. Hathaway said, bending over and touching the forehead of the dying man with her lips. "You must not carry such an unjust suspicion, that we have any mercenary motives. We all dearly love you, alone for your own sake and not for what you are worth."

"Humph! *maybe*," the general replied, gruffly, "but, I shall take care you do not deceive me. Byles, will you go summon Lawyer Green, and Santa Fe Syd to appear before me?" The parson nodded, and donning his slouch hat took his departure.

"Who is this Santa Fe Syd, brother?" Colonel Hathaway asked.

"His real name is Atherton, and I shall appoint him my executor. He has a half-interest with me in each of my gold-mines, and is perfectly trustworthy," the general replied.

The lawyer and Santa Fe Syd soon arrived.

The former was a "skinny," shrunken, shrivelled little man, with beardless face, sharp, twinkling little eyes, and reddish hair, while his attire seemed to indicate that he had not as yet amassed a large fortune at the pursuit of his profession.

The miner, Sydney Atherton, was a stalwart, handsome fellow of thirty years, although he looked five years younger, with a fresh, good-natured countenance, lit up by a pair of resolute blue eyes; blonde hair

and moustache, and a well-proportioned form clad in miner's habiliments, from the inevitable top-boots to the slouch hat upon his head.

"General Hathaway, they tell me you are badly wounded," he said, approaching the bed, and taking the dying mine-owner's hand. "Is there not something that can be done for you?"

"No—I'm past human aid, for I am filling up with the blood that only flows internally," was the reply. "I sent for you, Atherton, because I know you are honest. I *know* you are honest, because you have ever dealt so with me. I want to make a will, and appoint you executor of my estate, and have you see that everything is done as I want it. By the way, I will make you acquainted with Mrs. Hathaway, my wife of a few moments, Colonel Carrol Hathaway, my brother, and Miss May Miner, my step-daughter!"

Santa Fe Syd turned and bowed to the trio in acknowledgment of the introduction, giving a surprised start, as his eyes rested upon Mrs. Hathaway, and her daughter.

But, quickly concealing the surprise he probably experienced, he turned to the mine-owner.

"I am happy to meet your friends, general," he said, "and think that it would probably be better to entrust the settlement of your affairs to your brother."

"No! no! I will have no relative of mine controlling my business. You are the man I want, if you will accept."

"To accommodate you, sir, I will act for you to the best of my ability," Santa Fe Syd replied, bowing.

"Very well. Lawyer Green, prepare the form of a will, and get ready to jot down my bequests. Sydney, you remember that, several days ago, you made me an offer for my interests in the mining claims, which I promised to consider."

"I did, sir."

"I have thought the matter over, and concluded to accept the offer. You have the cash at your command, I suppose, when it is wanted?"

"I have, sir. The offer I made you was seven hundred thousand dollars, I believe?"

"It was," the general replied.

"But, see here!" the colonel interposed. "I do not believe you can sell this property without your wife's consent."

"Aha! I thought you'd show your cloven foot," the dying man said, fiercely.

"I think I see through the intricacies of a whole accursed game. I think I can see why you invited me a year ago to your home in Chicago, and entertained me like a prince, and constantly sung in my ears unbounded praises of yonder woman until I

grew blind and promised to marry her. You foresaw that I would marry her, and God only knows how much more. You plotted anyhow so that you calculated you would get possession of a share of my wealth—if not by actual gift, or devise from me, from that woman I have just made my wife, and whom I have suspected of being in league with you. But curse you, I'll block that little game! The mines were literally bargained for before this marriage; all that was left for me to do being to close the bargain by refusal or acceptance. That puts me without property, and no wife can attach money that has been accumulated or disposed of by agreement previous to a marriage. Lawyer Green, is this not the law in Wyoming?"

"I believe it is," the pettifogger replied. "The general has a legal right to act as it has pleased him in this matter, as if it were personal property."

"It must be a devilish queer law they have up here in Wyoming, then," the colonel replied, sullenly.

"Queer enough to thwart all your schemes, Carrol!" the general retorted. "Mr. Atherton, please note my bequests. Lawyer Green, are you ready?"

"Quite ready, sir."

"Then, listen: I, Guy C. Hathaway, being in full possession of all my mental faculties, do, upon my death-bed, make the following last will and testamentary bequests of my personal wealth, with a prayer that God may pardon all my sins, and prevent all wrangling and ill-feeling on the part of my remembered and disremembered heirs. To Sydney Atherton, my former business and confidential partner, I do hereby bequeath the whole of my moneyed possessions, consisting of one million and seven hundred thousand dollars in gold and greenbacks, on the following conditions: That he shall court and if possible wed my step-daughter, May Miner, daughter of my wife at the time of my decease. Should such an alliance be effected, within a proper length of time—say a month—said Sydney Atherton, who is to keep the money in execution of my will, up to that period, is to divide the amount with his bride, upon the altar, after the marriage. Should such an alliance not be effected, said Sydney Atherton, forfeits all claim to the fortune, and simply retains it in his keeping subject to the second clause, which is, if Colonel Carrol Hathaway and May Miner become man and wife, on favourable and happy conditions, each is to be delivered a portion, consisting of half of the whole fortune."

"That is perfectly satisfactory," Colonel Hathaway said, blandly. "It places me out of the embarrassing position of being

suspected of having a mercenary interest in the making of the will."

"I also am satisfied," Mrs. Hathaway said, taking the cue from the colonel. "I have some money of my own, and May will be as good an heiress as you could have chosen, dear husband."

"Supposing the conditions of the second clause are not fulfilled?" Santa Fe Syd asked.

"Then, you are to pay the whole amount to—"

General Hathaway did not finish the sentence right away, but when he did, he said—"Nobby Nell!"

CHAPTER IV

WILD MEG NARRATES

THE will was made, and Lawyer Green presented it and received the general's signature, and also that of Santa Fe Syd and Jim Byles, as witnesses, after which he stored it away in his capacious pocket, and took his departure.

By this time, the dying mine-owner was considerably exhausted, and the physicians ordered that the room be cleared in order that he might have a few moments of quiet.

As Santa Fe Syd was about to leave the shanty, he was overtaken in the kitchen by the new Mrs. Hathaway, who had stealthily followed him, and now introduced her shapely form between him and the door.

"Stop!" she said, authoritatively. "I know you!"

"Oh! you do?" he replied, coolly. "Well?"

"You are not Sydney Atherton—you are Sydney Miner."

"I never give the lie to a lady," the handsome mine-owner said, with a faint smile. "You are undoubtedly mistaken, my dear madam."

"I am *not* mistaken at all," she replied, in a vexed tone. "I knew you the minute my eyes rested upon you, and you also knew me."

"It is not impossible. A face, or a foe of your magnitude one cannot easily forget. I did recognize you, but kept the recognition a secret. I was not surprised to find you at your old profession of scheming. Do you remember the resolution we adopted at our last meeting, madam?"

"No!"

"Humph! I believe you lie!" the miner said, bluntly. "We passed a resolution, then, that forever hence we were strangers, yet foes, and while we knew each other not to the world, we were to have the privilege of balking each other's interests whenever we so chose."

Mrs. Hathaway scowled.

"I believe there was something said to that effect," she admitted, looking displeased; "but I, for my part, am truly repentant. I would like to have a long talk with you, Sydney, if you have time."

"Which I have not," he said, decidedly. "As I said before, we do not know each other. I bid you good-day, madam."

"But, hold! you must not go until you have told me whether you mean to fight against me?" she said, hissing, her face whitening, and eyes blazing dangerously.

"To the bitter end!" he replied, sternly. "You may count strong on me, too!"

He then brushed past her, and left the shanty.

Standing in the doorway, she gazed after him as he strode down the street, an unreadable expression upon her face.

As she stood thus she was joined by Colonel Carrol Hathaway, who had just come downstairs.

"Ah! so you're watching the executor, are you?" he said with a disguised spice of jealousy in his tone. "I suppose you have already fallen in love with him?"

She wheeled upon him, fiercely. "No, I hate him, even as much as I love you. You know how much that is," and she laughed a little wildly.

"You might better have said as much to the dying brother up-stairs," he retorted, stroking his huge side-whiskers. "By the way, the doctor thinks he will not live longer than sunrise, to-morrow."

"I hope not!" she said, coldly.

"Then, you are not pleased with the result, so far, eh?—that is, the making of the will?"

"No, I am not!" was the reply. "It was not as either you or I had expected. The old fool suspected too much of the true state of affairs."

"We will cheerfully admit that. Guy was always a hard, grasping, avaricious man, who suspected that everybody was trying to bleed him. Yet of late years, I have always been his sincere admirer, on account of his money. Ha! ha! money is a truly great magnet! But, the will is not so bad, after all. May must marry me, which fixes it all right."

"You forget. The settlement of the matter is in the hands of Sydney Atherton, who I may as well tell you is my enemy. He will try to marry the girl and thereby shove us out in the cold."

"Curse him! he shall not succeed!"

"You do not know that. He is a stubborn, immovable foe, when he chooses, and is influential here. Besides, May has a will of her own, and there is no telling when to depend on her."

"If coaxing and persuasion don't fill the bill, there are other ways of bringing a refractory spirit into subjection," the colonel suggested significantly. "By the way, who is the 'Nobby Nell' referred to by Guy?"

"I have no idea. You must make inquiries, and find out. Also, it will be well enough to keep on the right side of that lawyer Green!"

The Witch, Wild Meg, after firing the deadly bullet at General Hathaway, paused only long enough to note that it had taken effect, when she wheeled her spirited horse, and dashed away up the gulch main street of the town.

Instant pursuit was given by those who had seen the fatal shot fired, and by others who poured from the church, but all to no purpose. The horse of the Witch was a rapid runner, and she soon left the town behind, laughing wildly at the bullets that hailed around her.

In an hour she was back to the retreat of the Branded Brows, which being her home had been christened Cave Inferno. None of the Branded Brows were present when the Witch rode into the strange rendezvous, except Solid Sam, who was seated at a table in a distant corner, engaged in smoking a cigar, while he listened to the click! click! of an instrument, which was nothing more or less than a complete telegraph apparatus, in working order.

It was connected with four wires, two of which came in through the entrance to the cave, while the other two made their exit through a crevice in the rocky roof.

This telegraph contrivance was a bit of the young road-agent's ingenuity, by which he had succeeded in having news brought to him from the outside world, and of the movements thereof.

The stage and telegraph line running from Green River City, on the line of the Union Pacific Railway, to Camps Brown and Stambaugh, and other places in the Wind River region, passed over another range of peaks, not over a half-mile from that in which the cavern of the Branded Brows was located. With wire had Solid Sam first supplied himself, and then made his connection and return to the line, passing the wire through the cave, where it was attached to his instrument.

This line connected Placer City with the outside world, and his machine being equipped with a dumb receiver, Solid Sam knew of every message that passed over the wires, whether at his table, or away.

The other wires connected the Sweetwater mines with those at Atlantic City, and also were in the circuit with his battery.

"Well, I am back, you see," she said, dismounting. "Where are the band?"

"Out hunting, I guess. Any news from the mines?"

"Yes. General Hathaway is lying at the point of death. He was shot, at the altar, and I am proud of my marksmanship!"

"You shot him?" Solid Sam cried with a shuddering start. "Murder is a crime I did not think you capable of."

"Ha! ha! You do not know me—you do not know the rancour and hate of an embittered life. If you did you would not marvel that the sight of Guy Hathaway at the altar frenzied me, and caused me to do a sinful deed. But, you shall hear the story, which I have always kept from you. Listen attentively, without interruption, and I will tell it all to you."

There was a greenish, fiery glitter in the old woman's eyes, and a perceptible tremor to her person, as she seated herself near the Boy Road-Agent and fixed her gaze upon the floor.

"To begin with," she said, "I will go back into the far past—nearly half a century ago. At the time of which I speak there lived in the City of New York, a young married couple by the name of Vance, who, being blessed with an infant daughter, were as happy as the day was long. John Vance held a position of trust in one of the city offices, at a goodly salary, and with the love of a then amiable wife, had nothing to yearn for or crave, in his happy existence.

"Little Bethel, their child, was a sweet fairy, and as she grew in years she increased in beauty of both face, form, and womanly qualities, until, at the age of seventeen, she stepped upon the threshold of fashionable society, the acknowledged belle of the season.

"Her smiles and society were courted by many a rich and accomplished gallant, much to the anxiety of her parents, who knew the dangers of fashionable associations, but she passed the best of them by in a pleasant, firm way, that could not be misunderstood, and at the same time inspired the deepest admiration of her many suitors.

"This, until she arrived at the age of eighteen, when her parents sent her to Paris and Italy. Here she was to finish her musical education in a two years' course of study.

"To her parents Bethel was a loving and obedient daughter, and in their blind affection for her they indulged her in everything she desired. To such an extent, that when she returned to America, after two years' absence, John Vance found that his bank-account was exhausted.

"About a month after Bethel's return, she once more entered metropolitan society, and

in a short time became acquainted with a young military officer, Guy Hathaway by name, who was of a good family, and had won a generalship for service in the war.

"The acquaintance soon ripened to infatuation on the part of Bethel, and she wanted to marry young Hathaway on his own terms, which were that she must deliver to him a sum of fifty thousand dollars, upon the marriage day, which he would invest for her so that it would be certain to provide a good livelihood for her as long as she lived.

"This proposition she broached at once to her parents, but they promptly refused, agreeing that it was an unmanly scheme on Hathaway's part to swindle her out of the money.

"Moreover, they forbade her to have any further acquaintance with him.

"Bethel was not only disappointed at her failure, but greatly incensed toward her parents, and in anger declared nothing should prevent her from having the young general.

"About this same time, John Vance mortgaged his house and lot and personal property, for a limited number of days, for thirty thousand dollars, seeing an opportunity for a paying investment. As he would not use it in a few days, he deposited it in his desk, at home, in preference to putting it in the bank.

"Well, to make a long story short, the money turned up missing, and the day after this, Bethel was married to Guy Hathaway.

"Knowing, of course, that she had taken it, her father immediately sent a search-warrant after her and the young general, but all to no purpose. No trace of the missing money could be found, and both she and Hathaway denied having any knowledge or possession of it, whatever.

"Shortly afterward, Hathaway received the command of a small fort on the Western frontier, and with Bethel left New York forever.

"The parents of Bethel, having no money to redeem the mortgage, were eventually turned out of house and home, and the friends that once knew them, knew them no more.

"The shock of the great blow which had swept away both child and fortune was great, and had the same effect on both—to affect their minds with a species of insanity which was a strange mixture of madness and reason.

"They wandered from the city, making their way westward. They grew wild through ill-treatment and privation; folks avoided them because of their shabby appearance—feared them, because of a belief that they were in some way connected or leagued with evil-doers."

CHAPTER V

SOLID SAM AND HIS FATHER

"You, then, are the mother of her that was Bethel Vance?" Solid Sam asked.

"I am. White Beard, who was killed six years ago in Buckskin Canyon by the stampedes, was her father. By slow stages we wandered into the mining and trapping sections of the West, subsisting mainly upon what we could beg from the campers, or the game we killed.

"Six years after leaving New York, during which time we had heard but once or twice from Bethel, found us located in a wild district in the Yellowstone region. At times reports came back to inquiries we sent to strangers, that Bethel did not live happily with Guy, and the same reports told that, though he often abused her and her two twin children—a little boy and girl—she still bore patiently with him, seeming to be as much infatuated with him as at first.

"One spring—the first of our stay in the Yellowstone country—there came a terrible flood, that brought us back our Bethel—but God knows, as a terrible gift.

"White Beard found her, one day after the flood had subsided, somewhat—her and her little son, both washed upon a bleak point of the river, where the freshet had cast her.

"He recognized her, and brought you home to our humble abode, for he supposed her to be dead. But, unwilling to believe it, he at last went back, and, truly enough, found her alive, but so injured, that she died shortly afterward. Before she did die, however, she told a tale of bitter wrong that had been done her by Guy Hathaway, the culmination of which was his causing a couple of ruffians to kidnap her, and, with her children, send her afloat on the flooded Yellowstone, upon a log-raft. She was wrecked upon the bar, and for many hours lay stunned and bleeding. She remembered, however, of having her two six-year-old children bound to her at her last recollection, and as White Beard found her bonds cut, on first discovering her, it was evident some one had arrived ahead of him, and appropriated the little girl.

"Before she died, Bethel also begged forgiveness from her father, which was freely given, and White Beard soothed her in her last moments, promising that he would care for her child, the boy, and make all efforts to find the girl."

"Then, I am the son of Bethel and General Hathaway!" Solid Sam cried, springing to his feet, with a start of surprise.

"You are!" the Witch replied, "and I am your grandmother. You can now see

why I shot the human monster, your father, for there has not been a day since Bethel died, that I have not registered an oath before high Heaven that Guy Hathaway should never live to treat another wife as he treated my child."

Solid Sam was silent a few minutes, before he spoke, his gaze riveted upon the floor.

"You did right in speeding that fatal bullet, perhaps," he said, with a voice tremulous with feeling, "for you saved me doing the same awful deed, if you are telling me the truth about him. I already hate him because he was instrumental in the death of my mother!"

"I am telling you the truth, so help me God!" the Witch said, earnestly.

"Before the flood, we used to send with trusty trappers who visited the various places of residence of the Hathaways, and have them make inquiries. As a result, we always received the same reply, literally—Hathaway seemed to hate his wife and children, and abused them shamefully, in addition to letting them suffer for want of the necessities of life, and courting the society of other women!"

"Brute—monster, then, he is, and I have no sympathy for him!" Solid Sam said, fiercely. "Did you kill him outright?"

"No, I didn't. I am no fool. I meant that he should live long enough to make his will. You are his heir—the only rightful one I know of. He must leave his property to you, and if your sister is ever found, we will share it with her. Go at once, lest you be too late, and make known to him your identity. Tell him all I have told you, and lying at the point of death as he is, he will not dare disown you or refuse to do what is right."

"True. If I have a right to his property I am to have it, for I shall never get what I don't fight for, it appears. I will drop in upon him to-night, when matters are quiet in Placer City, and if you do not see me back in several days, do not be surprised."

"You will need to be careful!" Wild Meg said, with a shake of her head, "for the miners and roughs down there are bitter against you, and I saw a half a dozen reward papers posted up about the town, offering five hundred dollars for your capture."

"Ha! ha! let them paste the whole town with such papers, and I'll yet snap my fingers at them and whistle at their curses in defiance. But, to prepare against trouble, I'll take Fleetwind with me."

One of the pockets of Solid Sam's jacket was curiously constructed, being lined with sieve wire, and protected by a buttoned lapel. Going to a little cage in one portion of the cave, he took forth a small but plump carrier pigeon, around whose downy throat

was fastened a tiny blue ribbon, that in turn was tied to a bit of paper.

Opening his pocket, he shoved the bird gently into it, and then fastened the lapel to its place with a button.

The cause of the wire pocket now became obvious. While the outer view of the coat remained unchanged, the inside was left so that air could circulate freely through this novel, but excellent bird-cage.

Arming himself well, Solid Sam then mounted a large grey horse, and took his departure. Pursuing a short route across the mountains he was not long in reaching the Buckskin Canyon, where he dismounted, and continued on his way toward Placer City on foot, first having secreted his horse from the view of the trail.

Wild Meg had never to his knowledge lied to him, and therefore the young outlaw had no reason to believe that she had deceived him in narrating the wrongs instigated by the leading citizen of Placer City.

That night, General Hathaway lay upon his bed, alone in his room, the doctor having retired for a short nap.

Unable to sleep, the mine-owner lay there with probably anything but pleasant thoughts, for there was a troubled expression upon his face.

It was about this time that a door softly opened, to admit a dark figure, wrapped in a blanket—a man, with his slouch hat pulled down over his eyes.

The hat was raised as the new-comer approached the bedside, however, and the general gave vent to a gasp of surprise and horror.

"Solid Sam! the road-agent!" he uttered, huskily.

"The same, sir," Solid Sam replied, coolly, as he covered the invalid with his revolver. "Don't be at all noisy in your demonstrations, or I shall have to silence you. Do you know me, Guy Hathaway?"

"No—no more than as the accursed outlaw of the canyon!" was the fierce reply.

"Then it is time that you did know me," Solid Sam replied. "I am *your son*, rightfully, lawfully—the only son resulting from your union with Bethel Vance!"

General Hathaway uttered a smothered curse.

"You lie!" he gasped, paling before the stern gaze of the Boy Road-Agent. "I have no son living. My first wife and children died years ago, and you are a scheming impostor!"

"How did your wife and children die?" Solid Sam asked, fiercely. "Dare you own the truth, sir, lying as you are at the point of death?"

The mine-owner groaned and averted his

face, upon which there was a ghastly expression of terror.

"Go on!" he gasped. "If you have anything to say, I will hear you through."

"You are my father, although I am in no way or manner proud of the fact. Because of your crimes and villainy, it is not strange that I do not bear you either the love or good-will of a son. How long have I wondered what mystery surrounded my early life, but was unable to learn or conceive until to-day, when Wild Meg came to the front and granted the information—the whole strange story."

He then gave the general the story in detail.

When Solid Sam had finished General Hathaway was silent for several minutes. Then he said:

"All I can now do is to be penitent, and pray to God for forgiveness and pardon," he said, slowly. "I am sorry—have been sorry for years, but could not recall the dead to life. I will not crave your forgiveness, for you would probably not accord it."

"You are right. The story I heard from Wild Meg was enough to set me against you. Besides, as a citizen of Placer City, you have not particularly endeared yourself to me, by the unselfish interest you have manifested in your attempts to make me die by the Vigilantes. My principal reason in coming here, on learning that you are my father, is to induce you to [make your will in my favour.]"

"No. That is impossible. The will is already made, and I cannot change it."

"Will not, you mean?"

"Yes, if you like. I do not owe you anything. Indeed, I have no conclusive proof that you are not an impostor?"

"Dare you doubt me? Lying at the point of death, can you not see that I am the only one who would come forward, and give such strong proof? You know I am your son, sir—have known it, or suspected it, maybe, all along, which accounted for your enmity against me!"

"Whether I have, or not, I decline to say!" the mine-owner replied, stolidly.

"At any rate, I shall not leave you a penny. My prospects for the future are dark, and I may as well continue as I did before, as I have no faith that a change for the better would help me now. Kill me, if you choose, as it will not make much difference whether I die now, or a few hours hence."

"No!" Solid Sam replied rising. "There is One who will give you your just deserts more effectually than I can do. I will, however, have a share of the wealth you refuse to bequeath to me—to that I swear! I now bid you good-bye, forever: may God

have more mercy upon your soul than I could have!"

Then the Boy Road-Agent took his departure, as silently as he came.

The next morning Placer City was acquainted with the fact that General Hathaway was dead.

CHAPTER VI

THE POST-OFFICE AND THE POSTMISTRESS

THE night following the one on which Solid Sam, the Boy Road-Agent, had visited the general—now lying a corpse at his shanty, up the gulch—was a beautiful one, with a balmy breath of radiant nature blowing up from the south, and a gloriously bright moon soaring through the heaven's blue dome, with its brilliant setting of starry diamonds.

Notwithstanding the great beauty of the night, and the fact that crowds of people were out upon the Rialto of Placer City, as the simple gulch street had been christened by some one, more out of sarcasm than admiration, other crowds of humanity were congregated in saloons and places of amusement, but the most characteristic representation of Placer City citizens was to be found at the "post-office."

This was the principal hang-out of that class who did not as a rule frequent the saloons and dance-houses, and also of many of those who did.

"Mail-time" was the ripe time to find the crowd there, and to-night was no exception to the usual gathering.

The "post-offis," as an establishment, occupied a large cabin, some fifty feet wide by seventy long, and answered, in addition to its official calling, that of a general supply store, a news and cigar stand.

The office in question was a partitioned apartment in the rear end of the building, with a pigeon-hole of moderate size opening out into the store-room, into which each pilgrim was obliged to shout his name, and if any mail awaited them, he received it back through this aperture.

A door opened from this office behind each of two counters, which flanked either side of the cabin, and admitted of one person attending to the several businesses connected with the establishment.

Placer City was proud of its postmaster, or rather postmistress, for it was a woman who superintended the business—a dashing, vivacious, irrepressible young woman, whom everybody admired, and yet feared to "rile." Miss Nell Nugent was said to be

her name, but universally she was known simply as Nobby Nell.

Who she was, or where she had come from, was among the uncertainties.

Let us take a peep into the aforesaid office. Some thirty or forty men are collected within, ranged along the counters—a strangely contrasted array of humanity, both in face and attire.

Behind the counter stood Miss Nobby Nell, who, as the evening mail-stage had not yet arrived, was busying herself in weighing out groceries for a big bewhiskered miner, and making a very pretty picture in the light reflected from her well-cleaned lamps.

She had worn "the breeches" on her first appearance, and she wore them still, in conjunction with a dainty jacket, vest and spotless linen bosom, with a tie at the throat, jaunty, broad-brimmed hat upon her head, and neat boots upon her feet, into the tops of which her loose trousers were thrust.

Manly though was her attire, it well became her, and was not "loud" or flashy; it was really very *cute*.

Among those congregated within the post-office, to-night, were the better class of Placer City's citizens, with of course a sprinkling of the rougher and more adventurous element.

Lawyer Green was a centre of attraction, of course, and in answer to innumerable inquiries, he related all about how General Hathaway's will had been made, as many innumerable times.

"So that Colonel or Santa Fe Syd is goin' ter be heir, eh?" a miner observed—Jem Jinks, by the way, who held the important office of constable in the town. "Waal, Syd's one o' our own sort o' pards, an' durn my boots ef he ain't entitled ter hev ther shake. Don't you say so, Miss Nell?"

"On course I do!" Placer City's pretty postmistress averred, with a pretty nod of her curly head. "Santa Fe Syd's one of our citizens an' the Easterner ain't, which same one can tell by the cut of his coat!"

"That's so, by thunder" the constable accepted. "He ain't no rough nugget, like Syd, nohow, an' I propose that we assist ther boyee ther best we know how, ter git ther fortin'."

"Mebbe some one else will hev something ter say about that," Lawyer Green observed, dryly. "Ther gal, Miss Miner, hez sumthin' ter say about that."

"An' Santa Fe Syd he's soft on Nobby Nell, heer, an' dursen't go ag'in' her wishes, for fear o' gittin' planted, which quashes that little indictment!" declared Black Eph, who was voted by all to be the ugliest rough customer in the mines, when the "snakes"

were tickling the bottoms of his feet, which was not seldom.

"Hello! who lipped in for me, then?" the pretty postmistress demanded, looking up from the figuring-up of a bill of groceries. "Was that you what made that remark, Black Eph?"

"I'll allow I'm the man," the border ruffian answered, emphatically and coolly. "I intimated that, bein' tied ter yer skirts, Santa Fe Syd wouldn't durst take on no other craft, w'ich I opine is a complement ter ye, right from ther shoulder."

"Well, look out you don't make too free wi' yer compliments," Nell replied, a little flush of indignation dyeing her fair cheek.

"Mr. Sydney Atherton is in no way bound to me, nor have I any claim upon him whatever."

Without, in the balmy moonlight night, was now heard the jolting rumble of stage-wheels which cut short further conversation.

Out into the street poured the inmates of the post-office, as the creaking stage rolled up, to add to the crowd already collected.

It was not an uncommon occurrence for a large delegation of new citizens to arrive in the "coffin-cage," as the stage had been affectionately christened, and these Placer Cityites were always on deck, ready to give the new-comers a critical inspection.

To-night, however, there were but four passengers; but four though there were they were most singularly contrasted.

The first was one of that class of Westerners easily distinguished in their profession as cattledrovers, by fact of their constantly carrying a bull-whip—a young man in years, with a slight moustache, brown eyes, and long wavy hair that touched below his shoulders, while in face he was particularly good-looking, wearing a fearless and independent, yet genial expression.

He was attired in the usual costume of the prairie cattle-drover, with a pair of serviceable revolvers stuck in his belt—slouch hat, knee-boots, and homespun, the woollen shirt which opened with a collar at the neck, being fancifully embroidered.

Young in years appeared this young drover, yet the "grip" of his eagle eye betrayed the fact that he was no coward in a big crowd, and the way he pushed through the assemblage of citizens into the post-office, was a guarantee that he was in the habit of going whither he pleased, regardless of hindrance. The other passengers who followed him were a Chinaman, and a man and woman of the most striking appearance—the man being every inch a six-footer, if not taller, and one of the lankiest, most gaunt-looking specimens of humanity that it had ever been the fortune of these Placer Cityites to behold.

Evidently there was not a spare pound of flesh in his composition, his skin appearing to be drawn tightly over the bones, and the loosely fitting garments he wore over the skin. His features were gaunt and sunken, his eyes large and of a yellowish shade, while his mouth and feet were extremely large. His head was totally bald, and as shiny as the appearance of a full moon, not even so much as a few hairs vegetating there.

Upon his face a sickly stubble of hirsute covering had collected—that was all.

His attire was ridiculously ragged and dirty, with worn-out shoes upon his feet, and a clown-shaped hat upon his head.

His companion was precisely his opposite, in appearance.

She was a coarse-featured, red-faced woman of four feet six, and nearly as big around as she was tall; a person, who, at the least calculation, must have weighed three hundred pounds. She was dressed in a stylish travelling costume of costly silk, and, as compared with the "skinny" man, to whose arm she clung tightly as if afraid that the stiff mountain breeze would blow him away, she was a remarkable contrast.

The Chinaman, a flat-visaged, almond-eyed, greasily-attired pig-tail, was evidently attached either to the drover or to the two extremes.

CHAPTER VII

WYOMING WALT ENTERS THE ARENA

BEING the first son of Confucius who had ever set foot in Placer City, he was naturally regarded with anything but welcome glances—for where is the miner, old or young, from Washington Territory down to the Gulf, who bears any particular affection for the average Celestial?

"A gol-durned Chinerman!" grunted one miner. "I say, boys, who imported 'im 'ere? We doan't want none o' that breed."

"On course, we doan't," assented several others, in a voice. "Wages is low enuff, as it is, wi'out any of them p'izen cusses."

"Hurra! that's ther talk!" chipped in Black Eph, who now formed one of the crowd that had partially surrounded the Celestial. "Say, see hyar, you John Chinaman, don't ye know you're invadin' a Paradise that warn't nevyer intended fer pig-tails, an' sech like? You've got to bounce."

"Nixy! Chee Fee Ching-go no bouncee. 'Melican man no makee Chee Fee Ching-go bouncee!" the son of Confucius declared, independently. "'Melica free land—Chineeman he heapee likee 'Melica—go wheree! pleasee."

"Waal, I'll be cussed ef we won't jest

erbout see ter that, ye durned almond-eyed, flat-snooted sucker!" Black Eph cried savagely. And he sprang forward and seized the unoffending Chee Fee Ching-go by the collar, and yanked him around unmercifully. "Bring a rope, boyees, an' we'll hev er leetle pick-nick, jest as nice as ye please, all by ther light o' ther moon."

A dozen miners hurried away in quest of the desired halter, for it was down in their rough code that a Chinaman was not fit for anything else but to hang.

The young herder had heard the disturbance, and now came out of the post-office to learn the cause.

"Hello!" he ejaculated, as his flashing eyes took in the scene. "What's the matter? What are you a-goin' to do wi' that Chinaman, old man?"

"Hang 'im, by thunder!" Black Eph chuckled. "Mebbe you've got some lip to chip in ag'in' it?"

"Mebbe I have," the herder declared coolly. "I generally mix in my gab, when I see fit. What's the Celestial bin doin', that ye want to send him up?"

"Nothin' — positively and precisely nothin'," Black Eph replied, with a leer. "So what are you going to do about it, my young gobbler?"

"I'm going ter persuade you to abandon all notion o' stringin' up the Chinaman, I opine!" the young herder replied, quickly whipping a pair of revolvers from his belt and cocking them. "Take your hands off from that Chinaman, and let him go, or I'll put a semi-colon right between your eyes quicker than a kitten can say its catechisms!"

"Cuss ye, d'ye mean it, you young popinjay?" the ruffian demanded fiercely.

"I don't mean nothing else," was the reply. "The Celestial hasn't harmed any one, and don't deserve to be hung, or even molested. This is a free country, and everybody has a right to go where they please, except when the law interferes, and therefore you've no business to lay a hand on that fellow."

A murmur of disapproval came from the crowd. It was not to their liking, this interference.

The young cattle-drover still stood with his revolvers levelled in a way that seemed to indicate that Black Eph's prospects for a funeral were large, unless he speedily obeyed.

"See hyar, young feller, this ain't no fair shake," he growled, uneasily. "I'll allow ye've got ther drop, but I want to argy ther p'int, in ther behalf o' our citerzens, to whom I'm a representative. Et's an established fact that ther cussed Chinamen hev did more to'rd fetchin' down wages than ary other race on ther earth, an' et ain't natural fer us laborin' class ter love 'em for it,

overmuch. Up ter date, we've kept our town free frum ther pesky devils, an' I'll be cuss blamed ef we aire a-goin' ter let 'em swarm in an' cut us out o' our jobs. Ain't this so, boys?"

A grunt of assent from the miners was the answer.

"On course et is," said Black Eph, "an' ev'ry mother's son o' ye in favour o' givin' ther pig-tail a boost, will make manifest by sayin' I!"

"I!" was the ringing response, from many a throat, "I!"

"Contrary no!" cried the young herder. "If you are all in favour of hanging this Chinaman, *I am not*, and I'll drop the first man who attempts to boost him! That's me, Wyoming Walt, right down frum ther cattle regions, and chock full o' pure beef an' blood, in the bargain. Remember! I give you fair warning. The first man who offers to invest in this lottery will get a grand prize of a two-by-six pine box, providing the authorities sees fit to supply it."

The crowd were waiting on Black Eph, for the decision, for one and all had long known him as a lawless leader in scrapes of this sort.

The ruffian knew that he was left judge, and glared around him, as if in doubt what to do.

"Waal, boys, ye'll hev ter give me a minute ter decide ther case," he said, "but ye kin draw yer pop-guns, so that ther cowboy don't get too frisky."

"Stop!" Wyoming Walt yelled, sharply and quickly, a stern ring to his voice. "I'll blow the skull off of the galoot that draws a pistol!"

"And so will I!"

All eyes were turned toward the door of the post-office at the sound of the ringing voice, and all eyes beheld Nobby Nell, the pretty postmistress, standing there, a pair of silver-mounted revolvers in her hands, levelled at the crowd.

"Oh! it's me!" she observed, "and I guess I'm pretty generally known. I just remarked 'And so will I,' the translation of which means I'll blow the head off of the pilgrim who offers to harm the pig-tail or the herder!"

"Boyees, et's 'Our Gal,' w'ot speaks," said Jim Byles, stepping forward. "Be we a-goin' ter hang by the luv we've allus hed fer Nobby Nell, or be we goin' ter hang ther pig-tail? W'ich?"

"Hang ther pig-tail," growled Black Eph, fiercely. "Nobby Nell don't run this yere town, ner she ain't got ther say in this matter."

"Ther gal is trump!" a half-dozen different miners replied. "What she says we'll make our law. Ef she says don't hang ther Chinaman, so be it!"

"Well, I do say it and I mean it," Nobby Nell replied, decidedly. "The young stranger is right. You citizens an' landmarks of Placer City haven't no more right to lay hands on the Celestial than Solid Sam has to rob the stage. Let ther pig-tail go, boys, an' you'll sleep better fer not hangin' him to-night."

The words seemed to have an immediate effect, for the men mostly restored their weapons to their belts, and Chee Fee Ching-go was permitted to go his way.

The cattle-herder, Wyoming Walt, then turned back into the post-office, from which he had emerged on hearing the disturbance, and came face to face with Nobby Nell, who had evidently been waiting for him, as she was not behind the counter.

"See here," she said, motioning him aside from the immediate hearing of any chance bystanders. "Maybe it isn't any of my business, but I'd like to know your name, if you have no objections."

"None at all," the young herder replied, pleasantly. "I gave my handle to the crowd as Wyoming Walt—I'll give it to you in the same fashion."

"But, that is only an assumed name."

"How do you know that, pray?"

"Because I guessed so. There is a young cattle-drover named Wyoming Walt, but you are not him?"

"How do you know that, pray?" was the rejoinder, interrogatively.

"Because I have seen this Wyoming Walt, and he is not at all like you—is cowardly, and ruffianly, and ugly-looking, while you are quite the reverse," Nobby Nell said, gazing at him, unflinchingly.

"Oh! as to that, there could easily be two persons by the same name, in such an extensive Territory as Wyoming," the young herder replied. "Indeed, I know of a good many persons who go under one *nom de plume*."

"But you are *not* Wyoming Walt," Placer City's pretty young postmistress persisted, with a smile. "It is not likely there would be two by that peculiar name. You are some one else, who have hit upon the expedient of disguising yourself. Tell me, is this not so?"

"Possibly! Everything you know is possible, nowadays. But, whether I am the person I claim to be, or not, what does it matter to you?"

"Well, I'll tell you. My name is Nobby Nell, or Nell Nugent, for short, and I am a great admirer of bravery. You showed good grit, a bit ago, but it occurred to me that you were some one else than Wyoming Walt, and were running a great risk in coming here."

"Thanks for your kind anxiety in my

behalf, but I am not at all in danger I opine, and were I, it does not matter so much. You are the postmistress, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Isn't there a letter here for Wyoming Walt?"

"No, but there is one for Solid Sam," and Miss Nell lowered her voice as she spoke.

"Oh, there is?" Wyoming Walt said, without any apparent interest. "A friend of yours, I dare say?"

"No; I am not acquainted with him, but nevertheless admire his grit, and approve of his cause. But here comes the mail, and I must change it."

The coach-driver now entered, burdened with a well-filled mail bag.

And that very fact caused many a miner's eyes to sparkle with anticipations of the reception of letters from home.

Nobby Nell nodded to Wyoming Walt pleasantly, and then vaulting lightly over the counter, she received the mail-bag and disappeared behind the partition.

A faint gleam of admiration entered Wyoming Walt's eyes, as he watched her leave.

Quick of sight and quick of touch, it did not take Nobby Nell long to sort her mail.

No boxes did Placer City's postal system boast of, but behind the partition Nell had constructed a sort of trough, containing twenty-six compartments numbered alphabetically, so that A's mail was put into Division A, and so on, which enabled her to know just where to look for each party's mail without trouble.

The little wicket-door soon flew open, and a crowd surged forward to receive their instalment of letters and papers.

More out of curiosity than anything else, probably, Wyoming Walt joined in the line of inquirers, and when it came his turn, put forth his call, and to his surprise a letter was placed in his hand.

Not glancing at it, he stepped from the line, and allowed the next man to take his place, who chanced to be the bullying ruffian of the town, Black Eph, upon whose face there was suddenly seen a strange, triumphant leer.

Stepping to one side, Wyoming Walt glanced at the direction upon the envelope of his letter, and gave a surprised start.

It was addressed to "Solid Sam—the Boy Road-Agent," in a bold, graceful style of chirography.

A faint scowl of annoyance rose to the herder's brow, and he glanced sharply around to see if any one besides himself had seen the directions. As he did so he caught the leering gaze of Black Eph, and at once decided that he, if no one else, had seen them.

But, with a coolness that evidently came natural to him, he tore open the letter and glanced over it, his senses, however, so much on the alert, that he was well aware of what was going on around him.

He was also aware that the ruffian was approaching him, and accordingly, without apparent design, he put the letter into his pocket just as Black Eph came within arm's reach.

"Hello! got a letter, did ye?" the bully demanded, pausing, with a cunning grin.

"Well, what if I did?" Wyoming Walt replied. "Any one got a better right, I should like to know?"

"Luk out, ye young bantam; don't go to sassin' me, or I'll suddenly chaw ye up, I will. Let's see yer letter."

"Well, I guess not," the herder declined, coolly. "What for?"

"'Ca'se I wanter see it, that's all," Eph answered, blusteringly. "Cum, pass et erlong, will ye, or shell I take it away frum ye?"

"Maybe you'd better try to take it away, if you imagine it would be healthy amusement for you!" was the calm suggestion, and the young man folded his arms complacently across his breast.

"Oh! ye defy me, do ye?" the ruffian growled. "Ho, ho! maybe I hold the game card jest about now. I see'd ther directions uv that little billet-ducks, I did. What d'ye say to *that*?"

"Nothing of particular moment. The letter was given me through mistake, evidently, and not meant for me."

"Oho! that won't work, me boy. I know all about et. Jest let me see that 'ar epistol, or I'll tell who ye aire, an' then thar'll be fun!"

"You will?"

"Bet, yer stogiest boots I will!"

"Then, go ahead! I defy you to do your very worst!" was the young herder's answer.

With an oath, Black Eph stepped back a few paces, and pointing his finger at Wyoming Walt, he cried, in a loud voice:

"Boyees, we've got 'im, now! That feller's *Solid Sam, the road-agent!*"

CHAPTER VIII

SOLID SAM STEPS OUT

THE effect of the ruffian's words was magical.

Out came a great number of revolvers from different belts, to be grasped by sturdy hands, and the miners and citizens and adventurers who filled the room advanced a

step, with dark scowls, that were threatening in the extreme.

"Yas, sir-ee! that feller's *Solid Sam*, an' I know it!" Black Eph declared, with triumph. "I smelt a durned big rat, did I, ther furst minnit I see'd him, an' so when he went up yander ter ther mail delivery, I peeped over his shoulder, and see'd him get a letter addressed ter 'Solid Sam.'"

"Is this so, young man?" asked Bill Bolivar, who aspired to be Mayor of Placer City some day, should the place ever attain sufficient dimensions to need a mayor. "Is Eph a-tellin' the truth erbout this yere letter?"

"He is, undoubtedly," Wyoming Walt replied, not at all disconcerted, still standing facing the scowling crowd, his arms folded across his breast. "I received such a letter from the post-office, but it evidently was handed me through mistake."

"Oh! no it wassent!" Black Eph chuckled.

"What's the matter here?" Nobby Nell demanded, emerging behind the counter from the back of the postal partition. "Ah! are they trying to get you into trouble again, stranger?"

"It would seem so," Wyoming Walt replied. "You gave me a letter through mistake, evidently, which was addressed to *Solid Sam*, the road-agent, and this man they call Black Eph saw it, and now accuses me of being the party himself."

"And so they propose to introduce you to Judge Lynch, eh?"

"That's about the size of it, I reckon," was Wyoming Walt's response.

"Well, if I can help it, they won't. Gentlemen, you've made a mistake here, I allow," the pretty postmistress said. "This pilgrim, Wyoming Walt, is a herder from up in the cattle regions. *Solid Sam*, indeed! Why, *Solid Sam* hes got a scar across his brow, an' this pilgrim ain't."

"See hyar, Nobby Nell, nobody axed you fer yer lip-in, in this case. Ef you're a pardner ter this galoot, that ye back his case so strong, why, we'll boost you too, mebbe!" Black Eph snarled, savagely. "I've been in Wyoming Territory fer a dorg's age, an' never heerd o' sech a chap as Wyoming Walt afore. Ef he ain't *Solid Sam*, why in blazes did ye give him the letter?"

"The letter has been lying here in the office for several days, and so I thought I'd give it to some one in order ter git rid of it, and Wyoming Walt happened to be the one that got it. I didn't 'spect any such harm as this or I shouldn't have let it go out of the office. That's what's about ther letter, old man!"

"But mebbe we won't take yer word fer

thet ! " Black Eph replied. " I opine you've hed your way, hyar in Placer City, about long enough, an' et's time we hed a change. This galoot's Solid Sam, an' we're goin' ter hang him. What d'ye say, boys ? "

" We say yes, on course, ef he's really Solid Sam, " Bill Bolivar proclaimed. " But, Nobby Nell orter know, mebbe, for she knows 'most everybody. "

" Gentlemen ! " Wyoming Walt cried, " you needn't argue the case any longer. Miss Nobby Nell evidently made a mistake in giving me the letter, and believes me to be Wyoming Walt. Nevertheless, she is mistaken, for I am the very individual you have been trying to make me out—*Solid Sam, the Boy Road-Agent !* "

A murmur of astonishment escaped the crowd, for this was certainly startling information, boldly delivered. Even though many had at first believed him to be the notorious young outlaw they had hardly been expecting his bold declaration of the fact.

Coolly stood he there, after vouchsafing the fact, with arms folded across his breast, and his eyes flashing a dangerous light.

" Yes, I am Solid Sam, " he repeated, " the road-agent of Buckskin Canyon, the boy whom you drove out of this gulch six years ago. Do you wonder I am forced to take matters into my own hands, gentlemen, when you look around you and realize how much you are usurping my rights ? "

" We ain't usurpin' nothin', " Black Eph growled.

" You lie, you are ! " Solid Sam declared, undauntedly. " All this gulch had been staked off, and rightfully secured by John Vance, *alias* White Beard, previous to the time when a party of invaders, you included, came into the gulch, killed my grandfather, and drove my grandmother and myself away from our home. We both swore then that not much of our rightful gold should ever leave the canyon, and I allow there hasn't much left. "

" Oho ! ye brag o' yer robberies, do ye ? " Black Eph shouted. " Waal, ye may's well play game while your courage is up, fer we're goin' ter boost ye to glory, d'rectly. Cum, ye may's well surrender, and save us ther pleasure o' salivatin' ye ! " *etc.*

" I rather reckon not, " Solid Sam retorted, coolly. " Nor will you make the least attempt to take me. While you were intent upon catching your game, you were being captured yourselves. Ha ! ha ! if you look at the windows, my loving pilgrims, you will undoubtedly see what I mean. "

They did look with a start of surprise, and what they saw, carried significant weight to the words of the Boy Road-Agent.

Three windows there were upon each si-

of the building, looking into the store-room, and through these were levelled a glittering array of rifle-barrels, some score or more in number, in such a shape that nearly every person in the room was covered.

A murmur of rage went the rounds, while Solid Sam laughed, tauntingly.

" You see how it is, boys ! " he said, smilingly. " My hand happens to be ' flush, ' and I take the game. Ha ! ha ! I am sorry to rob you of your anticipated pleasure of hanging me, but I'm not ready to cross over the river yet, which makes the difference. You see you are covered, and of course you will be wise. You will make no attempt to hinder my departure, for each of the rifles you now see gazing at you, is manned by a Branded Brow, who will shoot the first man who offers to raise a murmur of dissent. Sorry to have to tear myself away from your affectionate society, but such is nevertheless the case, and so I bid you all a pleasant adieu ! Make way to the door, please, and don't stir from your tracks to follow me, under penalty of instant death ! "

He was obeyed.

When he reached the door, he turned and raised his hat triumphantly, a pleasant smile upon his face ; then turning, he quickly left the office.

At the same instant the rifles were withdrawn from the windows, and when those within the post-office gained the open air, nothing was to be seen either of Solid Sam or his Branded Brows.

Had the earth opened up and swallowed them ?

On the following morning, Placer City's daily newspaper contained a " boom " in news, and had a ready sale.

Among its local items of interest were the appended, which the editor had evidently laboured hard to present to his patrons :

" **SOLID SAM AGAIN.**—The notorious Boy Road-Agent, Solid Sam, again came to light last night, but as usual made his escape, not to the credit of our citizens. This young outlaw is constantly growing bolder and bolder, and some certain measures should be taken for his eradication. If our citizens—all of them hardened and manly nuggets of the old school—cannot effectually put a stop to the fellow's wild, lawless career, why not send to New York for Captain Williams, the champion clubber of the 'finest police in the world' ? He probably could fix our youthful road-agent.

" It is hinted by some, that Solid Sam is aided and abetted by the strange old hag, Wild Meg, who is credited with being possessed of witchcraft ; also that there is danger to every citizen of our town from this unnatural pair. It seems that, in the first

history of this town, the hag and her husband, together with the boy, lived here, but were driven away by the settlers. The man was killed for refusing to go, claiming that he and his wife owned this canyon by right of actual compliance with the rules of the Government. Whether this be true or not, the Witch and the young road-agent still claim to be the owners of the canyon, and give this as their reason for their constant depredations upon our citizens. Prompt measures should be taken for the early 'planting' of this precious yet dangerous crop of human thistles."

In another place was :

"It appears, according to a statement made by our eminent barrister, Lawyer Green, that Solid Sam, the road-agent, is the son, by a first marriage, of the deceased General Hathaway, and consequently the *rightful* or legal heir to the deceased's wealth. The lawyer tells a singular story which he claims the general confessed to him, before he breathed his last, and as the lawyer is a man noted for his veracity, we are in duty bound to believe him, although the story seems incredible, and we refrain from publishing it. In case, however, that it is true, lively times are impending, for Solid Sam is not remembered in the general's will. The will is as follows: If our townsmen, Syd Atherton, can effect an amicable matrimonial alliance with Miss Miner, the general's pretty step-daughter, the property goes to him and her, jointly. If not, in case the same arrangement can be effected between Miss Miner and Colonel Carrol, the general's brother, the property goes to them, respectively and equally. If neither of these alliances can be effected, the whole wealth, of which Atherton is trustee, is to be handed over to our pretty postmistress, Nobby Nell Nugent. It is a novel case in the extreme, and its settlement suggests a fair chance for six-shooters and gunpowder."

The reading of these extracts caused quite a sensation among all conditions of Placer City's citizenship.

Nothing had been seen or heard from Solid Sam since his escape from the post-office; nevertheless he was expected to be heard from, again, at any moment.

One stormy, windy night, about a week later the publisher of the daily paper, while sitting in his sanctum, received a caller.

No unusual occurrence was it for some pilgrim to drop in for the purpose of soliciting a puff, or to examine the latest papers and smoke the editor's pipe; and, therefore, the aforesaid editor, a lean, hungry-looking

man, did not look up from his writing, until the cold contact of something hard was pressed against his temple, sending a shiver down his sensitive spine, and he made the horrifying discovery that the muzzle of a formidable six-shooter was indeed threatening his head, held in the unwavering grip of an individual of some eighteen years, across whose brow was a black streak, as if painted there by a searing instrument.

No man of mighty courage was this weak representative of the newspaper fraternity, whose name was Bloffs; indeed, he had a mortal terror of warlike instruments, and the fact that one of these dangerous tools was pressed against his head caused him literally to wilt in his chair, and tremble all over.

"Heavens! don't—don't kill me!" he gasped, his teeth chattering, "I beg—don't shoot! Who are you?"

"Well, my Christian friend, I happen to be that notorious 'thistle' you deem easy to remove from this moral sphere," was the response. "Otherwise I'm Solid Sam, and I mean bizness!"

CHAPTER IX

SOLID SAM'S POSTERS

ABOUT this same minute, when the Boy Road-Agent had the newspaper man covered with his revolver, Santa Fe Syd left the post-office, equipped with an armful of groceries, and hurried down the street through the wind and rain toward his bachelor's shanty abode.

It was a wild night in the extreme, with a fierce gale blowing down over the mountains, driving before it a continuous sheet of rain, and there were but few persons abroad on the main street of the little mining-camp. Yet when in the neighbourhood of his shanty, the handsome mine-owner met a cloaked female figure, whom the strong wind was seemingly trying to prevent from going up the street. A second glance discovered who it was.

"Why, can it be possible that is you, Miss Miner?" he exclaimed, crossing over to her. "What in the world ever brought you out in the storm—or isn't it any of my business?"

"Yes, it's your business, for you are the person I started forth to find," was the gasping reply, for the huge rain-drops beat tattoo in the maiden's pretty face. "I had no idea it stormed so."

"It's a wild night," Syd replied. "But come—you must get in out of the storm. Yonder is my shanty, if you will accept of its friendly shelter."

"Until I have had a short talk with you yes," and Miss Miner timidly took the stalwart gold-digger's arm, until they were safely at the shanty, and she was seated by a cosy fire.

"It's a rough night—the roughest I've seen for some years," Santa Fe Syd said, as he deposited his purchases upon a table, which formed one of the appointments of a neat room. "Something of unusual moment, I take it, must have occurred, to bring you out in such a storm, Miss Miner?"

"No. I only came to talk with you concerning the will of General Hathaway and other matters, sir," was the answer. "But, first, I want to know if the woman I have been led to suppose was my mother, is my mother?"

The mine-owner looked surprised.

"Why do you come to me to ask this?" he demanded, turning upon her with a searching glance.

"Because I know that you know something about me!" May replied, firmly. "The glances exchanged between you and Mrs. Hathaway, on your meeting, did not escape me, and then, she has often hinted to me that I was nothing to her. Tell me, Mr. Atherton, I beg of you, if I am in any way related to that woman? You know—you can tell me that which I most want to know—*who I am!*"

Santa Fe Syd paced a turn about the room before he answered.

"Do you have any recollection of a former life?" he finally asked, stopping before her. "Does your memory date back to—say twelve years ago?"

"No. I cannot remember back as far as that. I remember when I was eight years of age, I lived with the woman I now call mother, and that one day when I played truant, she threw me upon the floor, and pounded me so badly that I was sick a great while, and under the care of a doctor. Further back than this seems to be a blank to me. Yet I have sometimes thought that I have seen your face, a good while ago, for it is singularly familiar in feature. Where or when, I have no idea, but yet I am almost positive that I have seen it."

"It is not impossible," the miner said, slowly, gazing at the blaze upon the hearth. "But, before I answer any of the questions, I want to ask you a few. What do you think of General Hathaway's will?"

"I think it is the strangest affair I have ever heard of. Did you read the piece in the newspaper about another who is the *rightful heir*?"

"Yes, and believe it. The Boy Road-Agent, as he is called, has borne the name of Solid Sam Hathaway ever since I knew anything about him, and I have often heard

General Hathaway speak of him in a bitter way that caused me to believe that he knew something more about him than he pretended. Lawyer Green claims that the General sent for him, just before he died, and made a confession of his sins, and owned that Solid Sam was his only lawful son, but the will being made, he refused to change it. He told Green that it was his strongest hope that you and I could form an alliance as man and wife, and thus inherit the money, according to the stipulations of the will. Of course, I have no designs upon his property, being in my own right moderately wealthy, and would of a choice wish myself well clear of the whole matter. Still, I am heart and hand free, and may marry when I find some person I dearly care for. I do not believe you would care to bind yourself to a person for life whom you have never known or even had reason to give a moment's consideration."

"No, I should not. But there seems for me only two choices. Either I must marry you, and get the fortune in that way, or I must marry the colonel, which I would rather be a beggar for life than do."

"Why, must you marry him if you do not choose?" the miner demanded, with flashing eyes.

"They would make me. Oh, sir, you do not know them—the colonel and Mrs. Hathaway. They only came here intent upon getting possession of the general's property, and if the Witch had not taken his life, I candidly believe that they would have done so. And now, they have tried to persuade me to wed the colonel, and when I refused, have threatened violence."

"If this is true, they'll find me on deck and to the front, and don't you forget it! The woman is not your mother, miss, nor is she in any way related to you. Years ago, when you were a seven-year-old child, I gave you over into the hands of that woman, who was then *my* bride—unfortunately so, perhaps, for I only lived with her a short three months when she deserted me and fled to Chicago, where I found her, on giving chase, in company with this man, Colonel Carroll Hathaway."

"I immediately applied for and received an absolute divorce, and also tried to get you from her, but as I had given you to her, lawfully, I could not take you from her. Making her first promise to treat you well, I then left for this part of the country, and never have seen either of you since, until you came here to Placer City."

"Thank heaven she is nothing to me!" the girl said, fervently. "But still, you have not told me who I am—whose child I was, before I was given into her care."

"No, and cannot, just now, for I do not even know myself. I will make efforts to find out, however, and report at another time."

"Very well. What information you have vouchsafed to me is of greatest value to me, and I will be content to let you use your own judgment as to when to answer me the rest. But, there is another thing to settle ere I go. What is to be done in regard to the will?"

"There is no hurry to decide that. Let it go awhile; in the meantime utterly refuse all proposals on the part of Carroll Hathaway and the other, keeping me posted occasionally as to their conduct. If they go to showing too much of the cloven hoof, I will soon dispossess them of shelter, for the shanty belongs to me."

"Then you have the upper hand, eh? Well, I am glad of it. But I must now be going, as the storm has somewhat abated."

It had not entirely ceased raining, but Santa Fe Syd produced an umbrella, and accompanied her to the door of the Hathaway shanty, where he bade her adieu, and turned his steps back toward his own humble habitation.

No one with an eye to business could have doubted, by the way he spoke, that Solid Sam did mean just what he said, and even the frightened editor had no doubts upon the subject.

"Yes, I am Solid Sam, and I mean business," the chief of the Branded Brows said, significantly. "Ye needn't be skeared, however, old honeysuckle, for I don't intend to swallow you whole unless you give me due offence, and then it's hard tellin' what I won't do. They say I'm awfully bad when I ain't obeyed. By the way, I suppose you're the proprietor and prime factor of this roost, ain't ye?"

"I am, sir—Timothy Bloffs by name, ye see," the editor declared, with a trifle more of assurance.

"Karect. You're the precise man I want to see, then. I want you to dust around lively, now, and print me half a dozen posters quickerin' a cat ever swallowed a mouse. D'ye hear?"

"Yes! yes! I hear. I can get you out some very fine poster-work at very short notice for ten dollars a hundred, cash in advance—warranted to give satisfaction."

"But I am not going to pay you a cent for it," Solid Sam assured, with a laugh. "I own this hyar gulch, and everything in it, having never received any rent, and consequently I don't pay for any little jobs I may want done. So just you climb fer yer stick lively, and set up ther form, or I'll make your

ideas scarcer than the teeth in a Centennial mule."

On the following morning, when the natives crawled out, each and every one experienced a thrill of alarm, for, pasted conspicuously to the fronts and sides of various buildings, was the following:

"NOTICE!"

"To ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:—

"Know ye, one and all of ye, who do reside within that mountain enclosed gulch, known as Buckskin Canyon, that I, Sam Hathaway, sole heir and owner to said canyon, do hereby warn ye to raise a sum of one hundred thousand dollars in currency, and place it at my disposal, being the purchase money of the deed, which I will promptly hand over on the receipt of said money. In case said sum of money is not placed at my disposal, within the next ten days after the appearance of this notice, I swear to cause certain destruction of the town as it now stands, and turn the inhabitants from their abodes, without any shelter, whatever. This is final, and I shall keep my promise.

"Signed,

SOLID SAM HATHAWAY,

"The Boy Road-Agent."

That was all, but it set the ball of excitement once more in motion, with renewed vigour.

The two queer people who arrived on the stage the night of the disturbance at the post-office, were characters in themselves.

Evidently neither were gifted with an extraordinary allowance of brains, and they were unconsciously the butt of much ridicule by the loafers and adventurers.

According to their own "tell," they were in no way related to each other.

The lean individual claimed to be Bill Romeo Shakespeare, a modern poet, engaged upon some Eastern literary paper, and stated that the woman was a love-sick admirer of his poetical gems, who persisted in tagging after him, in hopes that he would make her his wife.

The woman's name was Juliet Clawhammer, she said, and also declared that "B. R. Shakespeare had promised to marry her, and she was a-goin' to make him do it, if forced to follow him to the ends of the earth."

Where went the poet, followed his feminine admirer; if he laughed, she laughed; if he smoked, she smoked; if he drank, she drank.

The lank man ever carried with him a

bundle of manuscripts, and his chief aim seemed to be to dispose of them, at exorbitant figures.

On the night after Solid Sam had billed the town with his posters, Colonel Carroll Hathaway was among those who lounged in the post-office awaiting the arrival of the evening mail. But, instead of mingling freely among the different classes, which had been a popular characteristic of his brother, he held himself haughtily aloof, and busied himself in airily stroking his luxuriant side-whiskers.

It was while thus engaged that he felt a tap upon his shoulder, and turned to find standing in his presence, the lean, long, hungry-looking poet, Bill Romeo Shakespeare, whose companion, the faithful Juliet, was not far away, keeping an eye on the aforesaid poet, in a way that elicited a titter of amusement from the spectators.

"Well, what do you want?" the colonel demanded, gruffly, surveying the would-be master of the Muses, with displeasure.

"Ef ye please, capt'in, I've a little verse o' poetical logic to read you," the poet replied, with a bow.

CHAPTER X

CORNERED

AND from his pocket the second Shakespeare took a roll of writing paper and proceeded to untie it, a bland expression upon his strange face.

"Stop! You need not trouble yourself, for I do not want to see or hear any of your nonsense," the colonel replied, savagely. "I will not be bored!"

And with mighty dignity he turned and strode from the office.

Down the street he went, for several blocks; then paused abruptly and gazed back in the direction of the post-office.

Then he retraced his steps toward the post-office, a dark scowl upon his face.

Instead of entering he positioned himself at a window, and gazed eagerly within.

The poet was still there, attacking others with rehearsals of his compositions, the fat Juliet now keeping a close hold to his arm, seemingly with fear lest he should escape her, or get within speaking distance of the pretty postmistress, who was an amused looker-on.

For several minutes Colonel Hathaway watched the strange pair narrowly; then, with an oath, he left his position and walked rapidly to the Hathaway shanty, where he found the late general's wife seated in the sitting-room, engaged in perusing a novel.

"Where is May?" he demanded. "Is she in her room yet?"

Mrs. Hathaway looked up with a vicious expression.

"Yes—under lock and key. She declares she will die before she will marry you; moreover, she claims to know that I am not her mother. Santa Fe Syd has been putting her up to this!"

"Undoubtedly," the colonel assented with a frown. "He is altogether too much mixed up in our affairs. Besides, something has got to be done!"

"How do you mean?"

"Oh! in various ways. If we hope to get a bite out of the money, we've got to make new and rapid calculations. I saw a couple of queer people in town to-night, whom I am infernally suspicious of!"

Mrs. Hathaway's book dropped from her hand, and she grew suddenly pale.

"Is it possible? You are joking?" she gasped.

"Devilish poor plan it would be to joke about that," he growled. "I may be mistaken, but don't believe I am. One of the parties is a man—the other a woman, to all appearances. The man claims to be a poet, and attacks everybody that comes in his way, with an appeal for them to listen, and buy his mongrel composition."

A wild glitter took possession of Mrs. Hathaway's eyes as she heard.

"I believe you are right. If so, there is urgent necessity for lively action. What do you propose?"

"I scarcely know. Can the girl not be persuaded to marry me?"

"No, I do not believe she can. She has plenty of grit in her composition, and I candidly think she would suffer death before she would marry you."

"Curse her. Providing that she is in possession of some of our secrets, as we have suspected, from time to time, she would be better dead than alive anyhow!"

"No! no! Harm must not come to her—I promised Syd that!"

"Humph!" and the colonel sneered, fiercely. "Then you regard your promises to him, eh?"

"In this case, yes. Had I stayed with him, I should to-day be the better for it. But let that pass. Laying aside May, what other plan have you?"

"There is but a narrow path left. Either we must put Santa Fe out of the way, and take possession—or, we must make a raise of all we can, and skin out. It's our only chance of salvation, to leave this town behind us, as quickly as possible. Did the ruffian, Black Eph, come to-night?"

"Yes, and I sent him into the kitchen to await your arrival."

"Then I must see him and consult with him. He is probably the very party I want."

Several days passed by.

Days of anxious suspense, they were, to the poorer class of the citizens of Placer City, who looked eagerly to the monopolist mine-owners to raise the one hundred thousand dollars demanded by Solid Sam, and thus save the town from an unknown peril.

But no sign of any such a move was made among the wealthy ones, except in the case of Santa Fe Syd, who offered to donate one-tenth of the amount if others would come to the front with the other nine-tenths.

This they positively refused to do, believing that it was only a scare on the part of Solid Sam, and consequently putting no faith in the warning he had placed before their eyes.

The same night after the occurrence of the events last narrated, a muffled figure stole into the town from down Buckskin Canyon, when the golden camp was wrapped in slumber, and to the rear of the cabin used as the post-office building.

Here he paused, and cautiously removed his boots; after which he carefully fitted a key into the lock of the rear door, and in a moment it was open.

Stepping within the building, he found himself in the small apartment, sacred to the uses of the postal service.

There was a table on which were spread a number of letters and packages destined to go upon the morrow's mail; a lamp furnished a dim illumination, being turned down; in one corner, upon a rude couch, Nobby Nell had thrown herself at the conclusion of a weary day's labour, to seek rest in repose.

With a sharp glance at her, as if to assure himself that she was asleep, Solid Sam—for it was he—stole quietly to the table, and sorted the letters spread out upon it, with cool audacity.

Not finding any to his liking, evidently, he next proceeded to look over those in the delivery-trough where they had been placed, subject to to-morrow's inquiry.

He was thus busily engaged when he felt a tap upon his shoulder, and turned to meet the unflinching gaze of a polished revolver muzzle—the same deadly instrument being held in the grasp of Miss Nobby Nell.

"Oh! it's you, is it?" the young outlaw interrogated, coolly, proceeding to sort the letters over with the greatest nonchalance. "I didn't know but some of Judge Lynch's pardners might have got the drop on me. Nice evening out of doors, isn't it?"

"Probably!" Nell retorted, tersely.

"But, if you ever hope or expect to enjoy another one, you'd better keep your hands off from that mail. Come! who are you, and what do you want?"

"Oh! I'm Solid Sam, you see," and the night-hawk unbuttoned his huge cloak collar and raised his hat enough so that she could see his face, with its Branded Brow. "I had a desire to learn if these Placer Cityites have been attempting to smuggle any of my rightful property through the mails."

Nobby Nell lowered her revolver and re-stored it to her belt.

"No, they have not," she said. "Did you read that letter I gave you, when you were personating Wyoming Walt?"

"I did," the Boy Road-Agent replied. "It was from you, and stated that you had intercepted moneys that had been sent from here, in my behalf. For that I am sorry, as I want no person to sin for me."

"I did not sin," the girl said, with flashing eyes. "The money is all rightfully yours, and I don't think I did wrong in holding it for you."

"Nevertheless, I want you to forward it to its destination," Solid Sam returned. "I prefer to deduct my own toll, and if there is any future penalty to pay, I'll stand the blunt. 'Sh!'" he whispered, with a start. "Listen!"

They did listen, and heard the faint murmur of human voices, outside the building.

"I'm cornered!" the young outlaw whispered. "I was impressed with a sense of danger, to-night, and once or twice thought I was followed, but could see no one. But, those voices tell the tale, there are Vigilantes outside waiting for me!"

Nobby Nell laid her soft white hand upon his shoulder, a strange, wild expression in her eyes.

"They shall not get you, if I can help it," she said, resolutely. "Stay here. I will see what the chances of escape are in front."

In three minutes she returned, with no sign of encouragement in her face.

"No show in that direction," she said, shaking her head. "The Vigilantes are thicker'n flies on a carcass, and more are coming. It looks pretty dubious for you now. Are any of your men in town?"

"Not to my knowledge. I left them at the stronghold, as I did not anticipate getting cornered. But I'll fix 'em!"

"Who—the Vigilantes?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I'll show you. You'd better get back to your bed and feign sleep; or, better still, I'll bind you, which will prevent your being suspected of being in league with me."

"Nixy! I won't do that. I don't care if they know I'm your friend—I ain't afraid to tell 'em so."

"But that would be foolish, as long as you have a chance to save yourself and your position. Besides, if it is your desire to aid me, you can perhaps help me better as a silent friend than as an open one."

"Maybe you are right, and I'll do as you wish."

She accordingly once more laid down upon her couch, and permitted him to bind her hands and feet and tie a handkerchief over her mouth.

"The night is light as day, the moon shines so brightly, and I am going to set my carrier pigeon loose," he whispered, "then surrender, upon conditions."

He seated himself at a table, and hastily pencilled a few lines; then taking the pigeon from his pocket, he fastened the note under his wing. A chimney hole in one side of the cabin served as a means of exit for the bird, which was soon sailing away through the moonlit night, toward the stronghold of the Branded Brows.

Then drawing and cocking his revolvers, Solid Sam approached the rear door and rapped upon it smartly.

CHAPTER XI

SURRENDER

IN the meantime, let us return to the shanty of the Hathaways.

Colonel Carrol hastened from the presence of Mrs. Hathaway, to the kitchen where he found the ruffian, Black Eph, seated, engaged in smoking a grimy pipe, and sampling a bottle of old wine, which latter he had found.

He looked up with a nod as the colonel entered, his eyes bloodshot from excess of drink.

"Well, I got yer card, an' so I cum," he said, as the Chicagoan seated himself. "Ye sed ye wanted ter engage me in bizness?"

"Exactly!" the colonel assented. "I want a man who is not afraid to do a nasty job, so long as there is a straight hundred dollars behind it."

"Then I am your huckleberry," the ruffian assured. "Where ther's cash, I'm allus ready. Hain't particular what ther job is, neither; an' w'at's more, I can allus be depended on ter work fer ther interests o' ther man w'at pays highest. Want me to give some galoot ther send-off?"

"Yes. You've hit it exactly. Now, first, I'll give you a few points of explanation, and the directions afterward. You see, by

the will of my brother, his wife was almost totally ignored, and I, his brother, left with no hope of coming in for a share of his fortune, except I marry his step-daughter, which I do not find it convenient to do. This leaves the fortune to outside parties, and we, the rightful heirs, have come to the conclusion to make a struggle for our share. As there does not seem to be much of a chance for getting possession of it by fair means, I propose to resort to foul. To-morrow night, you and I will pay a visit to the shanty of Santa Fe Syd, and while you take care of him in an effectual way, I will take care of his fortune, and slide out. To-morrow morning, perhaps, I will dispatch Mrs. Hathaway to Camp Stambaugh, and on the following morning, I'll send her by the stage, a satchel, containing the swag. I will remain a few days, to avert suspicion, and then will join her, first having paid you your hundred. See?"

"You bet! I ain't blind," Black Eph replied. "How do ye want Santa Fe Syd sent off—by lead or steel?"

"Steel is the safest," the colonel replied, significantly. "That will do for the present. You can go, now, and come around to-morrow night about this time, ready for business."

Dark shadows hovered about the Hathaway shanty; from out of them the form of Santa Fe Syd glided a few minutes after the termination of Black Eph's interview with the colonel.

If he had overheard the import of the interview, he did not betray it in his appearance.

Standing upon the steps, he listened, and heard Colonel Hathaway leave the kitchen and enter the sitting-room. He then softly opened the door and entered the kitchen, which was wrapt in deep gloom. This did not matter to him, however, for he thoroughly knew the house.

Removing his boots, he crept cautiously from the kitchen into the hall, and up the stairs to the floor above.

Here he paused and listened.

Voices came from the room below which told him that Colonel Hathaway had joined the late general's wife in the sitting-room; whereat a grim smile came across the miner's face.

"So far, so good," he muttered. "It was a lucky omen that caused me to play eavesdropper and overhear Mrs. Hathaway make the remark that May was locked in her room."

Creeping along the hall, he soon came to the door of the room in which he believed May to be confined, and rapped softly on the door.

Instantly there was a stir within, and a voice demanded :

"Who is there?"

"Sh!" the mine-owner cautioned. "It is me—S. S."

"Solid Sam?" the voice interrogated, in evident surprise.

"No—Santa Fe Syd. 'Sh! don't make a noise, and I will try and get you out of this."

A bunch of keys had the miner in his possession, but none out of the lot fitted the lock. The next best thing was to remove the lock itself, which was fastened on the door outside. This was soon accomplished by aid of the miner's strong sheath-knife, and the door swung open, revealing May Miner standing inside, all ready cloaked and hatted for the street.

"I am so glad you have come," she said, in a low tone as she put her hand frankly into his. "I have been suffering many apprehensions that they would offer me some harm."

"They'll not get the chance, now," Santa Fe Syd assured, "for I shall take your guardianship upon myself. Come! let us get out of here as quickly and quietly as possible."

Solid Sam's rap on the door was answered by an oath without.

"Well?" a voice demanded, interrogatively—"What's wanted?"

"I want to know why this building is surrounded?" the Boy Road-Agent demanded. "Seems to me you're crowdin' things a little."

"Waal, we opine not," the voice responded. "Ef you're Solid Sam w'at's speakin', an' I reckon ye aire, we've got ye cornered, now, where thar ain't no hope fer ye. Thar's only two ways ter ther case—one's that ye've got ter cum out and surrender yerself—t'other that ye've either got ter surrender yerself, or stay cooped up in thar, until you're so lean ye ken't make 'er respecterble shadder."

"Which I allow I sha'n't do," Solid Sam asserted. "When I am cornered square, and don't see no opening, I am one of the most manageable persons in the whole world, and don't you forget it. Now, in case I surrender, what's ter be done with my anatomy?"

There was a low murmur of voices for a few minutes; then the first speaker replied :

"Ther best ye can expect is a good clean rope, and a stout limb," was his comforting assurance.

"But, don't you intend to give a fellow a little breathin' spell—a short reprieve, during which he can say his prayers, and make new resolutions for the future?"

Solid Sam demanded. "If not, a surrender would have no advantages."

"See hyar! aire ye chaffin'?" savagely; "fer ef ye aire et won't do you no good."

"No: honest Injun, I ain't giving you a racket. If I can have from now till day after to-morrow, 'thout bein' lynched, I'll surrender. If not, I won't. That's the long and short of that matter."

There was a protracted silence.

Evidently those who surrounded the post-office were holding a consultation.

"I guess they're deliberatin'," the Boy Road-Agent said, approaching Nobby Nell. "If I can get a reprieve of about forty hours or less, it will give the Branded Brows a chance to ring in a deal. Ah! here comes the answer," as a rap thundered upon the door.

"Hello, there!" came from the outside.

"Well, hello yourself," Solid Sam returned. "If you've got anything to say, say it."

"Waal, open ther door an' surrender. We've tuk a vote on et, an' ye kin hev till Thursday, at sunrise, in ther jail, afore ye're boosted. What do ye say now?"

Solid Sam took out his watch and gazed at it, meditatively. It lacked fifteen minutes of being Wednesday. He would have a little over twenty-four hours chance for escape if he surrendered.

That, he argued, would be a sufficiently long period of time, providing the carrier-pigeon safely reached the stronghold.

"Is this all a square deal, now?" he demanded. "If I give myself up, can I depend upon what you have said?"

"On course," was the reply. "Mebbe you ain't luved enny too much, but we'll keep up our side o' ther trace, all right."

"Correct. I'll take you at your word," Solid Sam declared. "If you go back on it, the crime will be on your own heads. I will surrender on the conditions proposed."

And unbarring the door, he threw it open, and stepped out into the night.

Instantly he was surrounded by a scowling crowd of town-people, and his arms made fast behind his back.

Not a few curses were levelled at him, and the aspect of affairs seemed to threaten that he would be strung up without regard to the promised reprieve, but such did not prove to be the case, for he was marched along to a strong cabin near the northern outskirts of the town, which had been specially constructed to serve the purpose of a jail.

Into this he was thrust, and the door locked after him, while a guard was placed outside.

The crowd then dispersed.

Excitement reigned supreme in Placer

City, and the night was suddenly filled with cries of triumph.

Santa Fe Syd and May Miner had just arrived at the former's shanty, when the crowd came along that was marching Solid Sam to the town jail, which boasted of the somewhat suggestive name of the "Tomb."

They had just arrived from their flight from the Hathaway shanty, and paused in the doorway, to gaze upon the crowd that surged by.

"Ah! they've captured Solid Sam at last," Atherton said, as he saw the Boy Road-Agent being hurried along. "I wonder if they're going to string him up at once? I hope not, for I cannot see that he is so much to blame for his wild career. The people are in reality usurping his rights."

Lawyer Green stepped up, at this juncture, from among the crowd.

"They've got the true heir to the Hathaway millions at last," he said. "They caught him up at the post-office, and the aspect looks dark for him."

"Going to lynch him?"

"Yes. Not now, however. He's got a short reprieve."

"I'm sorry for him," Atherton said. "But it may be lucky for the town that they've been able to nab him, before his threatened destruction of this place."

Green shook his head.

"It is my firm belief that his capture will only hasten the promised event," he replied. "The Branded Brows will soon hear of his capture, and we may expect lively developments. It seems strange, too, that he should be the late general's only son, and rightful heir."

"Yes: but is there any conclusive proof that he is such?" Santa Fe Syd queried.

"Oh! yes—plenty of it. The general himself told me the whole strange story. It seems that he, the general, becoming dissatisfied with life with his first wife, left her up at a village along the Yellowstone, and came on into the interior. In the spring, twelve years ago, he hired two roughs called Black Eph and Boston Bill, to go up to the village on the Yellowstone, and put his wife and children out of the way. They followed his instructions by capturing the mother and her two six-year-old twin children, a little boy and girl, and placed them, afloat, upon the raging river, on a frail raft, the mother bound hand and foot, so that she was helpless, and the children in turn bound to her.

"It was the calculation of the ruffians that they would all be washed or spilled from the raft and drowned, but in this they would have been doomed to disappointment, had they taken pains to follow the raft, for it was tossed high upon a projecting bar in the

river, and neither the mother or her little boy was drowned. What became of the little girl is not known. The mother and her boy were later found by old White Beard, the hermit, who it turned out was the father of General Hathaway's discarded wife.

"Mrs. Hathaway was too much injured to live, and died shortly afterward, but not until she had placed her boy in White Beard's charge, and made known to him her pitiful story. White Beard took Sam—which was the boy's name—and he was reared in a hermit's home, until the latter was killed by the stampeder, in this canyon, six years ago, since when young Hathaway and his grandmother have lived somewhere in the surrounding mountains."

"But was nothing learned in regard to what became of the little girl?" Santa Fe Syd asked, with sudden eagerness.

"No, not so far as the general knew. I saw the old Witch to-day, lurking near the town, and 'collared' her, on the subject. She corroborated the late general's story, with the additional charge that he was one of the greatest villains at heart that ever lived. I asked her in regard to whatever became of Solid Sam's sister, and she did not appear to know. She stated that when White Beard found the waifs of the wreck, there were only Mrs. Hathaway and her boy, lying upon the shore, in an apparently lifeless state. Near by, however, were bonds that it seemed had once bound them, but had been severed by a sharp blade. Horses' tracks also led from the spot, and White Beard had surmised that some horseman had previously crossed the river at this point, and finding the little girl alive, and the other two apparently dead, had mercifully taken charge of the female child, and proceeded on his journey. Wild Meg says they made every effort to trace the party, but all to no avail. The man had as surely disappeared with Solid Sam's sister, as though the earth had opened up and swallowed him."

"And from your story, I am, no doubt, the identical man," Santa Fe Syd said, with a meaning smile. "Twelve years ago, in the spring-time, I found this same shipwrecked party upon the Yellowstone shore. The woman and the boy were to all appearance dead, and as the little girl was still alive, I took her in charge, and continued on my southward journey, never dreaming that any romance would come out of the case."

"Then—oh! Mr. Atherton, am I the waif you found?" May Miner gasped, excitedly.

"Yes, you are the same," Santa Fe Syd replied; "moreover, according to Mr. Green, you are the daughter of the late General Hathaway, and are Solid Sam's sister!"

CHAPTER XII

THE END OF PLACER CITY

"CAN all this be true?" Lawyer Green exclaimed. "Well, well. It is altogether a most romantic romance in real life. So it turns out that if you come into possession of the Hathaway wealth, Miss May, you will only be getting what is rightfully your own."

"Oh! sir, I do not care so much about the inheritance as I do that the mystery of my past life is cleared up. So that young man we just saw marched past is my brother?"

"He is," Santa Fe Syd assured. "But he, of course, knows not that his sister is so near to him. Lawyer Green, if you can get an opportunity, I would like you to make this new discovery known to him; and, also, you may assure him that I will look to his rights and his sister's. The Hathaway wealth is all in my possession, and I have made up my mind that no one shall ever finger it ahead of the legitimate heirs of my late partner."

"Very well. I will try and get the message to him," the lawyer replied, as he bade them adieu, and hurried on down the street, while Santa Fe Syd and his ward entered the miner's shanty.

At the same time a strange figure stole from the shadows near the door, and dodged away among the crowd.

The attire of this party was that of a man, but in the ugly repulsive features it was not hard to discover the identity of Wild Meg, the Witch, although there were probably none among the surging crowd in the gulch street who noticed the fact.

She had evidently been an eavesdropper to the conversation between Santa Fe Syd and the lawyer, and there was a peculiarly unreadable expression upon her face as she hurried away.

A noisy night it was in the town of Placer City; nevertheless it quieted down to some extent before morning.

Shortly after the departure of Green, Santa Fe Syd conducted May Hathaway to the hotel, which nearly adjoined his shanty, and left her in the care of the hostess for the night, while he returned to his own abode and "turned in."

It was, he judged, well on toward morning, when he was aroused to the conscious fact that he was bound hand and foot, securely gagged, and in the power of two men, who were bending over him.

Who they were he could only infer by the black, scar-like bands across the lower portions of their foreheads, and their eyes. Being unable to speak, he could only look

daggers at them and wonder what was their purpose.

After carefully inspecting the bonds, evidently to see that they were secure, the two night-hawks laughed, and taking the miner by the head and heels, bore him from the shanty into the little canyon street. Here they were joined by two other Branded Brows, who bore between them no less a person than May Hathaway, also securely bound!

The street was at this hour deserted; the saloons had closed their doors; no longer the cracked music and sounds of drunken revelry came from the neighbouring dance-houses. In fact, the camp was wrapped in repose, which accounted for the boldness of Solid Sam's agents.

Two horsemen now rode out from the shadow of a building, and were handed the two prisoners before them in the saddle.

Then, with the utmost caution, they guided their horses down the street and out of the limits of the golden camp.

When morning once more dawned upon the little city, the former posters of Solid Sam were replaced with fresh ones, which read as follows:

"LAST CALL!

"THOSE citizens of Placer City who are wealthy and influential, having made no move toward paying for the rights they are usurping, I hereby warn them that unless Solid Sam is set free, by noon to-day, and the money demanded previously, is paid over to him, the town of Placer City might better have never existed; and I warn those who desire to escape without injury, to take their everlasting leave of this place at once, if the prisoner and money are not forthcoming by the above stated hour.

"This is fair and final, and should be heeded.

"LIEUTENANT BREEZE.

"Acting-Commander Branded Brows."

No matter what had been the previous excitement in the mining-camp of Buckskin Gulch, this proved the climax.

Business was quite suspended, and throughout the day the street presented a crowded, excited aspect.

At times it looked as if mob-law would prevail, and the speedy lynching of Solid Sam seemed inevitable; but the influence of a few sturdy miners as peacemakers, prevented any open rupture.

All day long a restless set of humanity surged in the street, and sentinels were posted at every approach to the town, by those capitalists and speculators who would not pay the money demanded by the Boy Road-Agent, to prevent any of the Branded Brows from gaining access to the town.

The discovery was made during the day that several miners and their families had taken leave, and this fact served only to add to the fears of those remaining that the proposed vengeance of the Branded Brows would come as promised.

Noon arrived and passed, but Solid Sam was not set at liberty, nor paid the money.

That fact sealed the fate of Placer City as a mining town.

About dusk Colonel Hathaway left the street where he had been promenading the most of the day, and entered the shanty that had formerly been the abode of his brother.

In the kitchen he found Black Eph and Mrs. Hathaway, evidently waiting for him.

The latter was arrayed in male attire as well as the former, and both were armed to the teeth.

"Everything is ready, and success promises to greet us," the colonel announced.

"Santa Fe Syd and the girl are missing, and unless they took the gold with them, which is not likely, it is ours. Eph, you may accompany us until we get safely out of the gulch, for there may be trouble yet."

They left the shanty, and hurried rapidly to that of Atherton. The door was unlocked, and they had no difficulty in effecting an entrance.

In ten minutes they emerged again onto the street, the colonel armed with two hand satchels, which were crammed full of something bulky and heavy.

As they left the shanty, there was a mighty thundering roar that made the very earth tremble—a vivid flash that illuminated the sky, and the air seemed full of sparks, and particles of burning things.

"By Heaven, Myers's supply store has blown up!" a miner cried, rushing by.

A pandemonium of yells followed the report, and the vast crowds surged eagerly toward the scene of the disaster, leaving the other parts of the town fairly deserted.

"The Branded Brows have begun operations evidently," the colonel had to confess.

"And now is our time to bid good-bye. Heir by craft is fully as good as heir by law, and having the Hathaway and some of the Atherton wealth in our possession, we need not complain. Come. We will find saddle-horses waiting just beyond the town."

"Yes, an' et'll be healthy ter get out o' ther place as soon as we can," Black Eph added, with an oath. "Look, will ye. The Branded Brows are keeping their promise!"

He pointed, as he spoke, in the several directions of the compass.

The blowing-up of the supply store, evidently, had been but a signal of what was

to follow. Here, there, yonder—everywhere, sheets of lurid flame began to creep up in the night, all over the village, from the sides of shanties that incendiary hands had fired. A circle of fire surrounded the doomed town, seemingly in a single instant, and the lurid reflection upon the sky grew brighter and brighter each minute.

"Come!" Colonel Hathaway cried; "there is no time to be lost. Let's escape while there is a chance."

And with fear-blanchéd faces they hurried away toward the northern part of the camp, falling in with the yelling, frightened mass of women and children that were also endeavouring to escape beyond the fiery limits of their former abodes.

A pandemonium of yells and curses filled the night.

Every person seemed only intent on saving as many of their personal effects as possible, for it needed no second glance to tell that the town was doomed by the destroying element. A fierce breeze was blowing through the canyon, and it was not in the power of mortal hand to check the conflagration. In five minutes after the blowing up of the supply store, there did not seem to be a building in the town except it was wrapt in flame.

Nor were any of the Branded Brows caught in the act of setting fire to the shanties, so stealthily did they plan and execute their work.

Nor in the panic of the fire did any one seem to think of the imprisoned Boy Road-Agent, Solid Sam, except one person, and she the pretty postmistress, Nobby Nell.

As soon as Myers's Supply had blown up, she left the post-office, and hurried in the direction of the cabin-jail as fast as her feet could carry her.

A brawny guard stood before the door as she ran up, an expression of impatience upon his face, which declared his desire to be at the fire,

"For Heaven's sake, go help to put out the fire!" Nobby Nell cried, as she ran up.

"The Branded Brows are trying to destroy the town, and unless prompt measures are taken they'll succeed. Go! you can help better than I. I'll take your place here!"

A nod from the miner expressed how agreeable this was to him, and the next minute he had surrendered the keys to Nobby Nell, and hurried away.

To unlock the door and liberate Solid Sam was but the work of a few seconds on the part of the young girl; then the young road-agent grasped her hand warmly.

"I thank you," she said. "You were very thoughtful of me."

Then he went to the door and gazed out into the night.

"The town is doomed!" he muttered, his eyes flashing, "and its own supporters are to blame. Before morning it will be in ashes!"

And he was right.

When day came again, where once had stood the mining-camp of Placer City, was now but a series of heaps of smoking ashes and charred embers, to tell of the vengeance of Solid Sam.

While toiling through the gulch, away from the desolate scene, a caravan of vehicles and horses bore those who had peopled the camp in Buckskin Gulch.

Later, a rude wooden cross might have been seen upon the ashen site, on which was inscribed the words—

"Trespassers beware!"

Later, there was a reunion in the cave of the Branded Brows between Solid Sam and May Hathaway, his long-lost sister, whom, with Sydney Atherton, the instrumentality of old Wild Meg had caused to be removed from Placer City, previous to the conflagration. Unnecessary to state, the meeting was a joyful one.

And when Santa Fe Syd made the announcement of his fears that all his own and the Hathaway fortune had gone with his cabin in the fire, Solid Sam shook his head.

"No, not so bad as that. It is, however, in the possession of Colonel Hathaway and the late general's wife, who are wandering somewhere in the fastnesses of the mountains. They stole it from your cabin when I was confined. They told me this, and mocked at me. Unfortunately I did not gain my liberty in time to overtake them, but Lieutenant Breeze and a dozen of the boys are after them and their capture is only a matter of time."

And so it proved.

The fugitives were overhauled, a few days later by Lieutenant Breeze and his men, and the stolen fortune retaken.

At the same time two horsemen rode up who proved to be Romeo Bill Shakespeare and his bouncing Juliet.

"Colonel Hathaway," the poet observed, quietly, "allow me to introduce you to Messrs. Peterson and Pratt, detectives, from Chicago, where you and your female companion here are wanted upon the charge of forgery and bank robbery. After having so extended a tour for your health, I dare say you will be ready to go back with us. Have you any objections to parting with the precious pair, Sir Road-Agent!"

"None whatever," Breeze replied, as he and his men rode away with the treasure, leaving the unfortunates in the charge of the clever pair of tracers.

Down in Buckskin Canyon no second city rose, phoenix-like, upon the site of the former mining-camp, for shortly after the fire, Leadville's fame became heralded to the world, and proved a magnet for the mining-class. Yet a couple of cabins there are in the gulch, and in one of them Santa Fe Syd and she that was May Hathaway live happily as man and wife. The other cabin is tenanted by Wild Meg; for to her and his sister, jointly, Solid Sam gave over all his interest in the mines and in the Hathaway fortune previous to his disbanding of the Branded Brows and departure to other parts of the Golden West, where a love for excitement led him as by a powerful hand.

Nobby Nell also left for parts unknown, although it was surmised by the Athertons that she would eventually bring up wherever did the strange youth—for whom she seemed to cherish more than a girlish fancy—Solid Sam.

THE END

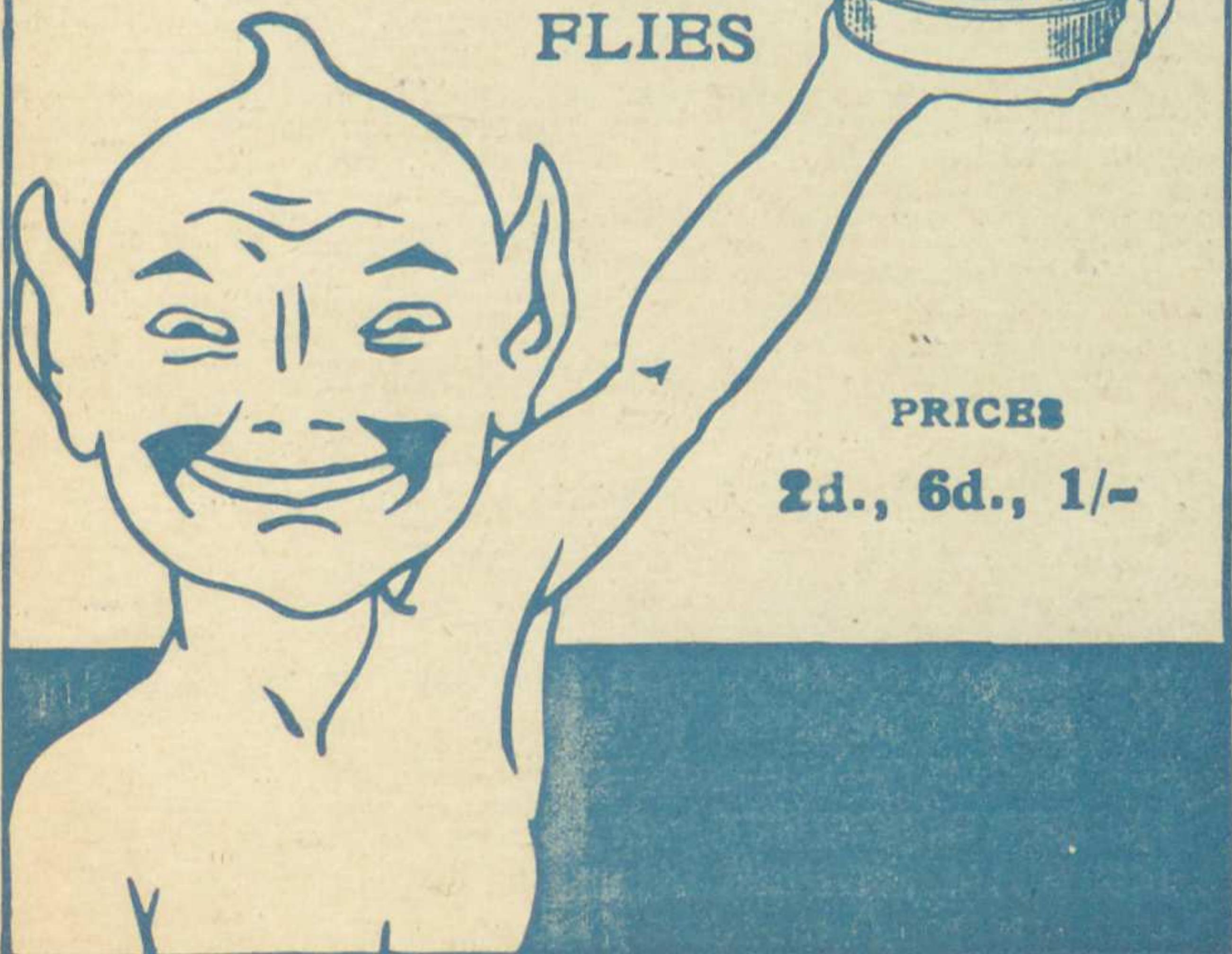
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